クロスカディア③

風ワタル地ノ放浪者タチ

神坂　一

富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト　谷口ヨシタカ

Crosscadia Vol.3

Wanderers in a Windswept Land

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson (June 2026)

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Crosscadia 3:

How many enemies had he slaughtered?

How much blood had been spilled?

He no longer remembered.

He had killed Scale-Kings. He had killed humans. He couldn't tell the difference between them anymore, but among those he killed, there were likely women, children, and the elderly.

It didn't matter. This was war.

War wasn't just about killing the enemy.

It was about killing each other. Killing—and being killed.

That is why he was prepared. Prepared to fall in the midst of battle.

However—

He never imagined he would be dying in a place like this, in the mountains near the Royal Capital while away on leave.

His white wings were stained with blood; his once-translucent horns were clouded white, riddled with fine cracks. Now, he didn't even have the strength to take to the skies.

He had been careless.

He hadn't imagined that agents of those "lizards" had infiltrated this far.

He had been caught completely off guard.

If they had fought normally, they were opponents he could have defeated without much trouble. But no matter how much he talked of "what-ifs," these wounds weren't going to vanish.

They weren't fatal, but they were far from light.

If it weren't for the friend currently lending him a shoulder, he likely would have rotted away right here, unable to move.

"We're almost there," said the companion supporting him. Even though he knew the red color of those wings and two horns was natural, they looked as if they were caked in

dried blood.

Wounded white. Supporting red. The two made their way through the lush mountain forest.

It would be faster if they could fly, but with his wings in this state, that too was merely a hypothetical.

"Stay with me, Gil. Once we get through here, there's a town. There's a doctor. A wound like that, you'll be..."

"...Zol..."

Breathing heavily against his friend's shoulder, he turned his white face toward the sky and called his friend's name.

The sky was filled with black clouds. For a while now, a thin rain had begun to pitter-patter against the surrounding foliage.

"...What... are we doing...?"

His voice was a mere whisper as his consciousness flickered on the edge of darkness.

From this spot, he could see only leaves and a murky sky, but the path ahead led to a town, and beyond that, their Royal Capital.

The King who sat upon that throne was the one who started this war.

"Is it really... necessary... for us to become... the so-called rulers of the world...?"

"Gil?" his companion asked suspiciously.

But Gil did not look at him; he simply pondered and whispered.

—We are the most superior beings. There is no need to worry about the whims of lizards, monkeys, or beasts—

He understood that much of what the King said. He agreed completely.

—Therefore, we must become the true rulers of this land, Crosscadia—

Whether it was necessary to go that far was questionable... well, he could understand the sentiment.

But—

"...Does the thing the King speaks of... even truly exist...? Or is it nothing more than a mere rumor or legend...?"

"Don't speak anymore. You're just wasting your strength," his friend scolded.

But if he didn't keep talking, he felt his mind would be swallowed by the darkness—so he continued.

"If that... is nothing but a legend... then..."

His words cut off.

The sky grew brighter.

It wasn't that the weather had cleared.

The two stopped in their tracks, staring blankly into the distance.

Was that—the area above the Royal Capital?

The clouds were glowing.

From deep within the pitch-black clouds, countless small surges of light began to well up toward the surface.

The two of them knew exactly what it was.

"...No way..."

"...Something like that..."

The white light on the surface of the clouds eventually formed a massive circle depicting some kind of pattern—

And then, the light.

It fell upon the earth.

Right where their Royal Capital stood.

"...That's—!"

Gil—Gilgazord's—muttering was drowned out by the wind created by the shockwave.

This is a story from fifty years ago.

As was only natural, Shin was in a bad mood that day.

A train moved through the fields. Outside the window: green.

With mountains shimmering in faint azure in the distance, children played innocently in wheat fields glowing under the mild afternoon sun, waving their hands toward the

train.

Trees with nameless white flowers could be seen here and there. Perhaps it was from them—the brisk wind blowing through the slightly open window carried a faint, sweet fragrance.

A comfortable sway. A quiet rhythm.

A train journey—

Shin did, in fact, like vehicles like "Magic-cars" and trains, and he had even harbored a longing for travel.

He had once told a friend that he wanted to try traveling by Magic-car or train someday.

And now, his dream had been realized.

...Well, if there was one problem, it was that Shin wasn't riding by choice; he had been brought along in a state almost akin to kidnapping.

Human beings are strange creatures; even when seeing or hearing the exact same thing, the way it looks changes depending on one's mood.

For example, the current scenery, through the eyes of the disgruntled Shin:

Outside the window, boring, unchanging mountains and fields stretched on endlessly, and kids who knew nothing of his circumstances or hardships were waving their hands brainlessly, which strangely rubbed him the wrong way.

Perhaps because mysterious flowers were blooming all over the place, the wind coming through the window felt unpleasantly sugary.

And to begin with, couldn't they do something about the loud, damn clattering noise and shaking of the train on the tracks?

—And so it went.

In this state, there was no way he could enjoy the trip.

The chirping of the birds sounded like they were laughing at him, and the voice of the lunch-box seller at the previous station only made him irrationally angry, thinking, *Are you trying to squeeze even more money out of me?* Even when the conductor came by on his rounds, Shin felt annoyed that he had to show up at all.

Completely twisted, he remained sullen and silent, staring out the window.

Then—

"Having fun?"

Along with the voice, something red popped up and wobbled in the corner of his vision.

"Does it look that way?"

When he answered without even turning his eyes, the other party immediately replied:

"Nope, not at all."

—*Ah. So this is what "intent to kill" feels like.*

Shin thought that to himself.

As for his appearance, he was on the tall side with black hair. Because his eyes looked a bit sharp, in the past, his friends and acquaintances had praised him with comments like, "Based on looks alone, you're an organization hitman," or "The most likely candidate for a suspicious person questioning."

And now, such a person was sitting in a foul-tempered silence. If this looked "fun," they ought to visit a hospital for their eyes or brain.

As Shin tried to commit to ignoring her, the red thing slowly intruded into his field of vision.

Short, red hair. Atop it, two hair ornaments of the same color wobbled.

When Shin turned around with a slow, deliberate movement, she gave a tiny start, quickly ducked her head, looked away, and pretended to whistle—though she couldn't actually whistle.

She looked to be about thirteen or fourteen. Her name was Mei.

That was the extent of what was known about her.

She was a girl who had suddenly tumbled into Shin's life one day, claiming—whether true or false—that she had no memories prior to that.

A self-proclaimed villain. Of unknown origin. And she treated Shin like a subordinate.

And then—

Shin's days of constant trouble began.

There were many "blue," "gray," and "black" things he felt depressed just remembering, and now he found himself semi-forcibly embarking on a journey to a distant land.

"And?"

"Eh?"

When Shin asked, Mei stopped pretending to whistle and asked back.

"Didn't you want something?"

"No, not particularly."

"I see."

When Shin said that and closed his mouth, turning his eyes back to the window—

In the corner of his vision, the red thing popped up again.

When he turned, Mei gave a start, ducked her head, and went back to fake-whistling.

.....

Shin stared at the girl in frustration for a moment, then asked:

"By any chance, do you just want attention?"

"Mind reading?"

"No."

Shin spoke bluntly.

Originally, there were two other companions in this private compartment. However, a short while ago, those two had gone out to the dining car to buy lunch boxes.

And then, this behavior.

There was no other interpretation than that she was bored and wanted attention.

If he continued to ignore her like this, she would surely keep pestering him.

Left with no choice, Shin turned around with a sigh.

"...If you're so bored, you should've just gone with those two."

"Even if you demand such unfair labor of me..."

Incidentally, the money for the lunch boxes was, of course, not coming out of Mei's pocket.

"You're really honest, or rather, the type that's going to get stabbed by someone someday."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"No."

"Hmph."

Mei puffed out her cheeks.

"Just because you're in a bad mood from the long trip, you don't have to take it out on me~"

"Ho-ho. So, according to you, the 'long trip' is the only one at fault, and you've done nothing wrong?"

At Shin's question, the girl blinked a few times, then frowned and tilted her head.

"...Well, when you put it that way... as a villain, it would be higher points for me to admit I'm the bad one, but if I admit it, I don't want 'Subordinate Number Three' taking it out on me..."

She started muttering something to herself.

Every time she tilted her head left and right, her red hair ornaments bobbed up and down.

Incidentally, "Subordinate Three" was Mei's name for Shin.

Of course, Shin had no memory of ever becoming anyone's subordinate. It was simply what she chose to call him.

He wasn't going to demand she call him by his full name, Shindred Khaylam, or even "Lord Shindred," but he at least wished she would stop calling him a subordinate so casually in front of others...

But she wasn't the type to listen to such requests.

—Anyway—

Taking advantage of the fact that Mei was busy agonizing over something, Shin turned his gaze back out the window.

It was indeed a long journey.

They would head to a northern port by rail, and from there, take a sea route to the Northern Continent. That was the route Shin and the others had planned.

Nearly two full days had passed since they boarded this express, but they were still far from their destination. Even if the train was on time, it would likely take another five

days just to reach the port at the northern edge of the continent.

—To begin with, the railway system itself had only recently been put into practical use. Even if it was called an "Express," it didn't mean it moved at an extraordinary speed; it simply meant it stopped at fewer stations and spent less time waiting for other trains to pass.

And after that, a ship.

Being in a bad mood for the entire duration of such a long trip was by no means enjoyable. Not for those around him, and not for Shin himself.

Shin understood that, but even so, he didn't feel like he could just snap his fingers and start enjoying himself.

He was being forced to go along on this trip—that was certainly part of his foul mood.

But there were other things he couldn't quite come to terms with.

Even though he was being "forced" along, he wasn't wearing a collar, nor was he being threatened with hostages. If he really wanted to, returning to the city where he used to live wouldn't have been particularly difficult.

Despite that—

Shin was dragging his feet and accompanying Mei and the others.

Why?

He didn't know the reason himself.

Because he didn't know, he felt unsettled and irritated.

He did have a certain amount of debt and curiosity toward Mei.

Who exactly was she? It would feel wrong to part ways here and decide to act like he knew nothing.

But those were small things. They weren't reasons enough to throw away his schooling and leave behind his familiar city and friends.

Then why was he traveling with them, even while grumbling and wearing a sour face?

As Shin wondered, in the corner of his vision—

The red thing popped up.

When he turned around, there was Mei again, pretending to whistle.

"...Weren't you... thinking about something? Did you find an answer?"

Asked this, Mei shook her head vigorously from side to side.

"I got bored of thinking."

"....."

What exactly would it take to correct this person's personality?

As Shin pondered that with a somewhat melancholy feeling—

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Along with the voice, the door to the compartment opened.

Entering with four lunch boxes held in both hands was a young man with golden hair.

He looked to be about the same age as Shin. A casual, light-colored shirt suited him well.

—Though, there is a saying that handsome men and beautiful women look good in anything.

If he were an ordinary human, he surely would have been popular.

However, his rather oddly shaped ears were quite noticeable even from a distance, and if you got closer, you could see that the pupils in his golden eyes were slit vertically.

Rezeld Ginos Resizanor.

Though he had changed his appearance to look human for now, he was originally of a race called the "Scale-King Race" who lived on the Northern Continent.

The group was heading toward his homeland, the Northern Continent.

"Food~"

"Yes, yes."

To Mei, who happily reached out both hands, he—Rezeld—handed over a lunch box with a smile.

—Yes.

There was one thing Shin thought wasn't bad about starting this journey.

His diet had become reasonably rich—or rather, more human.

Until then, because of an unidentified freeloader and various temporary expenses, he

had been in a rather pathetic situation.

Though, since things had been normal before all that, it felt a bit wrong to be so happy about his current diet.

"By the way, where's that other one?"

While receiving his lunch box, Shin suddenly asked.

It went without saying. He meant the one remaining person. She should have left the compartment with Rezeld...

"Who knows?"

"What do you mean, 'who knows'..."

"Shindred. Even among Humes, the word 'delicacy' (tact) exists, doesn't it?"

"...Ah."

Being rebuked like that, Shin gave a small groan.

He had assumed she had gone with Rezeld to buy the lunch boxes—

...The restroom, huh...

Feeling his face flush, Shin hurriedly tried to cover his embarrassment with a joke.

"I... no, I just thought maybe she was out having a territory dispute with some dog another passenger brought on board..."

Twitch.

At Shin's joke—which was meant to hide his blush—Rezeld, and Shin who had said it, both froze simultaneously.

—It's possible.—

That's what they both thought.

The other person who wasn't here—Laphra Lifra—was, in many ways, a dog-type girl.

How "dog-type" was she? To the point where she might actually have a territory dispute with another dog.

Whether there were actually passengers on the train with dogs—and whether animals were even allowed on trains to begin with—was unknown, but in the first-class cabins, there might just be such passengers.

"...I'll go take a look."

"I'm coming too."

"I'm bored, so me too."

The three of them said in turn as they left the compartment.

Later—

When Laphra Lifra was "rescued" in the dining car, it was said she was staring longingly at a ribeye steak bone left behind by another customer.

Seeing the train running past the wheat fields, the children waved.

If asked why, they would be hard-pressed to answer... they waved because they wanted to wave. That was the only answer.

If forced to say, it was because they liked trains, and if one of the passengers waved back, it made them feel happy for some reason.

The train passed by in an instant. Even so, the children watched its retreating form for a while—

For a moment, the sun was obscured.

In the sky they looked up at, black wings moved through the blue.

"What's that? A bird?"

"Whoa. It's huge."

"Stupid. There's no bird that big and fast."

"Then what is it?"

"Didn't it look like a person?"

"No way. Dummy."

"You called me a dummy again!"

The children made a fuss for a while, but as the wings disappeared beyond the forest, they quickly lost interest and became absorbed in another game.

Some of them might go home and tell their parents about it, but they would likely just be brushed off.

Therefore, the children did not realize.

What that thing actually was.

And the children, naturally, did not know.

That on the train that had passed by, there was a girl named Mei.

That her life was being targeted by a certain presence.

Or perhaps, not knowing and not noticing is what true happiness is.

The wind and scenery flowed beneath him.

In the midst of the spreading green, thin strips of steel color ran.

That's the "railway track" thing the humans had laid across the earth. It seemed they couldn't even travel without relying on something like that. They were truly inconvenient creatures.

In that regard, he and his kind were different.

By flapping their wings and accelerating with the power of "Arts," they could cross the sky at speeds exceeding the wind. Far faster than a box that could do nothing but crawl along an iron path.

He had been following the target train for several days. The people on board likely didn't think they were still being tracked. They must be getting careless.

It was about time to make a move.

He flew past the target train and soared over the forest. The forest covered the hills, and the ground rose and fell gently.

The tracks ran through it, making several gentle curves.

Deciding on a suitable spot—

The black wings deactivated the acceleration Arts and landed in the forest.

If a "Hume" had seen him, they would surely have made a huge scene.

He was a being who trod the earth with two legs like a human, yet was not human.

Long limbs suited to his large frame. Two twisted horns grew from the right side of his golden mane. A pair of wings resembling the curtain of night.

The leather armor and the two short swords at his waist showed that he was not a

mere monster, but a being of intelligence.

But humans sometimes likened them to the demons found in legends.

—The Demon-Fairy Race—

A race with high combat capabilities living on the Western Continent.

In the war fifty years ago, how many Humes were slaughtered by their overwhelming power? Even today, when friendship between the various races is encouraged, many humans still fear them.

No.

The reason Humes feared them wasn't just because of a distant war.

A short while ago, in a city called Burgess, the "Devas" had caused a riot, and many people had died.

Not many people knew the truth behind the incident, but the incident itself had become news and was known far and wide.

And—

The only survivor of the Devas who caused the commotion in the city was the man here—Sezenol.

The mission he had been given was simple and clear. Take two subordinates and eliminate one Hume woman.

The target woman had one "Dragno" and one Hume man on her side, but it shouldn't have been a difficult mission—

That's what he had thought at first. Both he and his two subordinates.

But—the result was this.

His two subordinates had lost their lives, and he alone had survived. The target and the people around her were safely and leisurely continuing their train journey.

True, there were several unforeseen factors.

The participation of a "Rewarder" not in the preliminary report. The fact that the target woman and the Hume man were more than he had anticipated. The fact that the Humes brought out tanks and casually fired cannons inside the city...

But whatever the reason, a defeat was a defeat.

A short while ago, there had been a directive from "above"—the one who gave him orders.

Continue monitoring the target, and after joining up with the unit sent from the home country, join their command.

It was a reasonable order. But Sezenol had no intention of simply obeying quietly.

He hadn't been told *not* to make a move until reinforcements arrived.

He knew it was a convenient misinterpretation, but—if possible, he wanted to take down the target with his own hands and wipe away the humiliation.

Of course, a direct frontal assault was reckless. It wasn't that he lacked confidence in his skills, but he knew the difference between confidence and overconfidence. In fact, previously, even with all three of them together, they had failed.

Even if he aimed for a surprise attack, if they sensed his killing intent and took up an intercept position, it would be nearly impossible to find a chance for victory.

In that case—he just had to either not project killing intent or not let them take up an intercept position.

It wasn't an impossible task.

After all, the targets were currently on a train.

"O-OHHH!"

Sezenol roared.

The space seemed to grow slightly brighter—and it was certainly not his imagination.

He slammed that brightness straight down.

—Onto the tracks.

GYU-BA!

In an instant, a flash of light spread through the area, and after it vanished—

A section of the left and right rails, along with the ground beneath them, had been melted and torn away.

Law-Breaking Arts.

Using a living being's "magical power" or "spiritual strength" as a trigger, and using sounds called "Incantations" or patterns called "Sigils" as a medium, it is a technique

that causes the destruction, transformation, or conversion of matter.

The way it works is as if it breaks and rewrites the very causal laws (Causality/Providence) of the world. Hence the name "Law-Breaking Arts."

This is not a technology that exists only for destruction. It was Law-Breaking Arts that had been accelerating his flight speed until a moment ago, and it seemed the train the targets were on also used power born from a type of Law-Breaking Arts as its motive force.

It seems Humes can't even use Law-Breaking Arts unless they use tools called "Magic-Rings" or "Magic-Belts" with sigils engraved on them, but of course, they—the Devas—are different.

Once they master the method, they can manipulate it at will.

Just as Sezenol had done now.

With this, the preparations were complete.

Very soon, the train carrying the targets would pass through here.

The location was just beyond a gentle curve. Even if they tried to stop, they wouldn't make it in time.

A box that can only crawl atop iron rails has no choice but to step off the path and tumble once those lines vanish.

If that happened, those on board certainly wouldn't escape unscathed.

Whether the targets would conveniently die was a matter of debate, but at the very least, they would no longer be in a condition to fight properly.

If they got off with light injuries, it would be difficult for Sezenol to defeat the targets alone, but it would still serve as a guaranteed delay.

...Normally, he didn't like such crude methods, but he couldn't afford to be picky now.

Sezenol hurried deep into the forest. It would be the height of stupidity to get caught in the train's derailment himself.

After running for a while, he stopped in a spot hidden by trees where the tracks were completely out of sight.

Surely this far away would be safe.

Now, all he had to do was wait.

"Sometimes, if I don't bite something hard, my teeth get... itchy."

Having been escorted back from the dining car to the private compartment, Laphra Lifra answered that way when asked why she had been staring at the bone.

She looked to be about the same age as Shin. Dressed in loose-fitting clothes, her waist-length blonde hair was tied in a thick braid and held together with various colored ribbons.

Looking so repentant that even the feather decorations on her headband seemed to wilt, Laphra Lifra hung her head toward the person she recognized as her master—Mei, who sat beside her.

She's a dog.

She really is a dog.

Shin and Rezeld exchanged silent glances.

She—Laphra Lifra—was originally a member of the Spirit-Possessed Race from the Eastern Continent, but she had come to Mei following some elder's revelation or prophecy.

In terms of culture and customs, there were many differences between her kind and Humes, but the greatest difference was their ability to gain extraordinary fighting strength by partially transforming their bodies into beasts.

And the beast Laphra Lifra transformed into was a golden—dog.

Not a wolf, but strictly a dog.

A wolf would have looked cooler, but since she insisted on it, there was nothing to be done.

Her dog-like behavior patterns were likely due to that.

The reason she grew attached to Mei was because she was given food, and she was strangely obsessed with her rank among her companions.

Furthermore, she apparently liked bones.

From now on, it might be better to occasionally include ribeye steaks or bone-in chicken thighs in their meals.

"I don't care what it is, just give me food~"

The impatient Mei spoke up and opened the lid of a lunch box.

Today's was a sandwich lunch. There were several types with main ingredients like pork sauté, roast beef, and salmon sauté with cream sauce, sandwiched with vegetables like sliced onions, lemon, and lettuce. A few kinds of fruit sat on the side of the container.

"Yes."

Accepting Mei's demand as a word of permission, Laphra Lifra's expression brightened.

"I shall partake~"

With a phrase that was either a greeting or a declaration, Mei plucked up a salmon sandwich—

Thump.

The train gave a violent lurch.

Screams echoed.

In the next instant.

The salmon sandwich Mei had dropped landed miserably on the floor of the compartment with a wet thud.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

Mei stared at the salmon sandwich with a face near tears and full of regret. Seeing this, Laphra Lifra snapped her head up.

"Shindred! Give Mei yours!"

"Ooh! Nice idea!"

Mei's eyes sparkled.

"Why me?"

Though he spoke sullenly, he understood the reason well enough.

According to Laphra Lifra's rankings, it seemed Shin was at the bottom of the "pack" of four. And for Mei, he was Subordinate Number Three.

Incidentally—not that it mattered—Subordinate Number Two was Laphra Lifra, and for some reason, Subordinate Number One was a permanently retired number.

Rezeld seemed to be treated as a guest.

Of course, Shin had no intention or obligation to acknowledge or obey such things.

However, Laphra Lifra pointed at the sandwich on the floor with a serious face.

"It's fine. Shindred, you can eat this one."

"Don't be ridiculous. It is *not* fine."

Amidst the three of them making a fuss, Rezeld acted as if he didn't know them and silently began eating his sandwich alone.

"—Even so—"

While looking out the window, Rezeld murmured softly.

"That was quite a shake just now..."

Outside, there was nothing but the spreading green of the trees—

—What is the meaning of this?—

Sezenol stood frozen in shock.

A train that had lost its path—the rails—should have derailed spectacularly.

As he waited in the forest, the sound of the train had grown louder and louder—

Just when he thought the moment had come, the sound gradually faded into the distance.

Feeling suspicious, he approached the tracks—

And there, the rails he should have destroyed were intact.

Not back to normal, exactly.

It was likely something created through Law-Breaking Arts. Hardened crystals, shimmering in the sunlight filtering through the trees, stretched out to repair the missing sections of the track. It couldn't be called a neat job, but it seemed sufficient to prevent the train from derailing.

But.

Who on earth did this?

Not much time had passed from the moment Sezenol left this spot until the train passed

through. Whoever noticed the broken tracks had repaired them using Law-Breaking Arts and vanished in that short window without Sezenol even noticing.

That was an impossible feat for a mere Hume. It couldn't have been a railway worker who just happened to find the damage. Of course, it would also be impossible for the target's group on the train.

—Does that mean they have other allies?

What bothered him most was that the crystals used to repair the track looked familiar.

In a land far from here, the city where the Devas lived was lined with houses supported by crystal pillars created through Law-Breaking Arts.

It was similar. The texture of those crystal pillars and the crystals before him.

Unless they possessed both strength and a certain degree of flexibility, they wouldn't be able to support a building, nor a speeding train.

—Could it be—

An unpleasant suspicion welled up in his chest.

But as long as there was no way to verify it, for now, tracking and monitoring the train took priority.

Spreading his wings, he beat the air and soared into the blue sky.

In the short interval, the train had moved ahead. He put strength into his wings to give chase—

In that instant.

Something crossed the sky.

Those things, which looked like nothing more than dark afterimages, came to a sudden halt around Sezenol, becoming five shadows.

"Commander Sezenol, I presume."

The one who spoke was the opponent directly in front of him.

He was half a head shorter than Sezenol, but possessed a standard physique for a Deva. He was clad in armor carved from the shell of a Lapis-Carapace Beast, and on both hands, he wore gauntlets with blue-glowing claws.

A single large horn grew from the top of his head toward the back, and perhaps due to

the lighting, his pure white hair looked almost pale blue.

"I am."

To his answer, the blue Deva gave a small nod.

"I am Commander Soldima. You may have heard, but from this point forward, you will be under my command."

"...Understood."

Sezenol nodded, killing his emotions.

It was certainly humiliating to be put under someone else's command without being able to take revenge for his subordinates with his own hands.

However, for a Deva, disobeying orders or acting in a way that hindered the mission due to personal feelings was an unforgivable disgrace—no, even a crime. Even Sezenol wasn't prepared to go that far.

"Now, where are the targets?"

"...I will guide you. Follow me."

With that, Sezenol let out a roar toward the void.

Immediately, a ring of pale blue light, large enough to walk through standing up, appeared before him.

Sezenol flapped his wings hard and plunged into the ring—

The light and his form vanished simultaneously.

No, they hadn't vanished. Turning one's eyes, a black shape could be seen streaking through the sky. He had entered a barrier of Law-Breaking Arts, dramatically accelerating his flight speed.

"—We are going as well."

With Soldima's words, the remaining five shadows also became afterimages and raced through the void.

It smells like the tide.

The one who said that was Laphra Lifra.

It was still far to the port. The train was currently stopped at a large junction station

called Cremol. It was a relatively long stop for cabin cleaning and waiting for other trains.

According to what they had heard, this place was indeed close to the sea, and from here, the tracks would head north through the mountains slightly inland from the coastline.

However, the sea was not visible from anywhere on the platform where they had stepped out for a change of pace.

Still, the reason Shin and the others believed Laphra Lifra's words was likely because they knew that a dog's nose is much better than a human's.

Or perhaps, by some quirk of the wind, a faint scent of the tide reached this far at times.

But.

While Shin and Rezeld were satisfied with that explanation, there was one who was not.

"Ugh, what a liar. There's no sea."

Mei, looking as disappointed as possible with her hair ornaments hanging limp, spoke up. Laphra Lifra became defiant.

"Laphra Lifra does not tell lies! I really smelled the tide!"

"But still~"

While talking, Mei looked around.

Multiple platforms lined up. Stopped trains. People coming and going.

On the platforms, shops were lined up, targeting travelers.

The most common were food stalls. Waffles, cookies, fried fish, and local vegetables. Amidst the mixture of various smells, even if a faint scent of the tide drifted by, an ordinary person wouldn't be able to tell.

Perhaps to keep out trespassers trying to hitch a ride from the tracks, wooden fences were built around the tracks for a considerable distance. Peering over them, one could see the townscape of Cremol on one side and a distant mountain range on the other. No sea was to be found anywhere.

"I can't see it."

"But the sea is there!"

Laphra Lifra raised her voice even louder—

"—Little girls, do you want to see the sea?"

The voice came from an unexpected direction.

As the group looked around for the owner—

There was a stall near the fence a short distance away. A red sign had "Georges' Cookies" written in large letters, and a fragrant scent drifted from the storefront.

Behind it, a man who looked like the owner sent them a signal with his eyes.

He was a burly middle-aged man who didn't suit his white cook's coat in the slightest, but one doesn't bake cookies with their looks. Well, I suppose this sort of thing happens.

"Can we see it?"

Saying so, Mei ran over without a second thought. The other three had no choice but to follow.

"If you buy my cookies, that is."

"I'll buy them."

"Thanks for your business."

True to the words, it was a done deal.

"Hey, you... just deciding on your own..."

"Isn't it fine? Just that much."

Restraining Shin as he tried to scold her, Rezeld paid the owner and received a bag of cookies.

"Alright. Then..."

The owner brought out a wooden box from behind the shop and placed it with a thud near the fence.

Pointing toward the area diagonally across the fence:

"Listen, climb up here and look over that way."

"That way?"

As told, Mei climbed onto the box, put her hands on the wooden fence, and peeked over from the nose up.

"...That way... that way...

—Whoa—"

The girl's expression brightened.

"—Can you see it? The sea?"

"Yeah!"

Mei gave a spirited reply to Shin's question, her gaze still fixed on the distance.

"...What's it like?"

"Even if you ask me what it's like... if I had to say, it's sea-like."

"That explains nothing."

As Shin looked up at Mei with a somewhat frustrated expression, Rezeld suddenly had a thought and asked:

"—By any chance, Shindred, have you never seen it? The sea."

"I haven't."

Averting his eyes slightly, Shin answered grumpily.

Yes. He had never seen the sea.

The Burgess City where he previously lived had a large lake nearby, but it was inland. He had never had the opportunity to pay a high train fare and spend days traveling to the sea.

That's why when Laphra Lifra mentioned the "scent of the tide," he had no idea what kind of smell it was.

As a child, he had even seriously thought, *They say "scent of salt," but salt doesn't have a smell.*

By now, he understood it didn't mean it that way, but he still didn't know what kind of scent it was.

However—the fact that he didn't know the sea...

"...By any chance... you guys..."

Realizing something, Shin looked back and forth between Rezeld and Laphra Lifra.

"The sea... have you seen...?"

"You haven't forgotten where we came from, have you?"

Rezeld gave a wry smile, and Shin's cheek twitched slightly.

Yes. Thinking about it, that was true.

Rezeld was from the Northern Continent. Laphra Lifra was from the Eastern Continent. They had crossed over to this Southern Continent using some means. If so, there was no way they hadn't seen the sea.

"Ho-ho. In other words—"

The voice came from above Shin's head.

Hurriedly looking up, he saw the girl looking down at him with a mischievous, smirking grin.

"In this group, Subordinate Number Three is the only one who hasn't seen the sea."

"...!"

Shin was speechless at her words.

If they continued this journey, he would inevitably see the sea sooner or later...

But until then, there was a possibility he would continue to be teased about having never seen the sea.

—No, looking at Mei's gaze, it was almost a certainty.

She might seriously start saying things like, "The one who hasn't seen the sea is on shopping duty," or "There's no food for someone who hasn't seen the sea," or "The Devas are attacking, so the one who hasn't seen the sea should fight first."

He had to prevent that. At all costs. Even if he had to risk his life.

Therefore.

"I'm looking too."

As soon as he made his unilateral declaration, Shin scrambled up onto the wooden box.

"Whoa!? Wait!?"

"Shindred! What are you doing to Mei!?"

"I told you, I'm just looking at the sea. You don't make a fuss either."

Mei and Shin struggled atop the box. Laphra Lifra looked up, her eyes narrowing in

anger.

The stall owner watched the three of them with a warm smile.

"What's this? Big brother hadn't seen the sea either? Go ahead. Take a good look."

Saying so, he turned back to Rezeld with a smile.

"By the way... it seems like quite a large group, is one bag of cookies enough?"

"...Then another bag, please."

While that exchange was happening, Shin scrambled up onto the wooden box, put his hands on the fence as if leaning over Mei's back, and looked around. The direction Mei was looking was definitely—

"—...!"

Shin swallowed his voice.

It was visible, small and far away.

Between building and building, lined up near and far. At the end of the stretching road.

There was an endless expanse of water.

The sky was—blue.

Reflecting that blue and the sunlight with a shimmer, the expanse spread out.

Suddenly, the wind changed.

It blew through the street, bringing a scent Shin had never smelled before.

"—That is—"

Yes. That was it.

It was the sea, which Shin was seeing for the first time in his life.

"Excuse me. Um, just a moment..."

Being called from behind.

The person the station attendant turned to see was a man in his forties in a suit.

The platform for night trains at the very edge of Cremol Station.

There were no passengers using it during the day, and because the train stopped on the

next track acted as a wall, this spot alone was strangely deserted amidst the bustling station.

It was in such a place that the station attendant was called to a stop.

"What is it?"

To the attendant's question, the man spoke with a somewhat puzzled face.

"Actually... well, I found something strange..."

"Something strange?"

The attendant frowned at the unclear answer.

"Yes. It's a bit hard to explain in words... could you come here for a moment?"

Saying so, the man turned on his heel and started walking without waiting for a reply. While following him, the attendant was feeling fed up.

It happens sometimes. These irrational "forgotten items" on the trains and in the station.

To his knowledge, there had been underwear, kittens, gold teeth, and dentures. There were also nonsensical things like a box full of onions or a bucket full of seaweed.

For the time being, those are processed as lost property, but there are many things that can only be thought of as having been abandoned.

This platform also had a larger volume of "forgotten items" compared to the number of passengers because it was a platform for night trains, sleepy passengers forgot them, or perhaps during the day, it was easy to be targeted by malicious passengers who take advantage of the train waiting time to deliberately and secretly leave "forgotten items" because it's hard for people to catch them?

Due to the wooden fence surrounding the station and the train stopped on the adjacent track, the platform was in shadow, giving it a somewhat dim impression despite it being daytime.

The kiosks that only open at night and the storage sheds for maintenance and cleaning were lined up with their doors tightly closed. Of course, there was no one around, making it feel as if he had stepped into another world.

—Come to think of it, it was this platform—

While walking behind the man, the attendant suddenly remembered a ghost story he

had heard from a senior.

—In a corner of the platform where only night trains stop, a baby was abandoned long ago. No one noticed for a while, and partly because it was summer, by the time it was discovered, things had become quite terrible.

Since then. After the night train leaves. Or even during the day, when the platform is covered in shadow by the train and the fence.

Along with a crying sound, the shadow of something crosses underfoot. Thinking it's a stray cat or something and chasing it, it disappears somewhere—

Then, suddenly, something jumps onto your back with a thud. A rotting smell fills your nose. A small, slimy hand strokes your cheek, and in your ear, "Waaah!"—

.....

The attendant hurriedly shook his head from side to side, brushing away the unpleasant delusion. It must just be a story made up by the senior staff.

"It's here."

He came back to his senses at the man's voice.

Where he had stopped was between the kiosk and the storage shed. It was about wide enough for one person to pass through, and there was an entrance for the kiosk's clerks in the back.

He peeked in as told, but as far as he could see, there was nothing.

Further back—there was a small gap between the back of the kiosk or warehouse and the fence... was it there?

But that place was... the place where the abandoned baby the senior attendant mentioned was.

Just as he hesitated and stopped.

There was a sensation of something on the back of his neck.

But.

Before he could realize that it wasn't something harmless like a baby's ghost.

Snap.

The attendant's neck bone was broken in the shape of a "V," and he collapsed on the spot

without being able to make a sound.

"Forgive me. I needed that uniform."

The man—Sezenol, who had transformed into a Hume using Law-Breaking Arts—muttered to the no-longer-moving attendant.

When he tried to be a bit more open-minded.

The scenery spreading outside the train window showed various faces.

The fields and mountains, which had only been reflected as a monotonous stretch of green, showed that no two were the same if one looked closely, and their colors changed from moment to moment as the sun tilted. The mountain rivers sometimes flowed violently, and sometimes calmly.

And now. The large evening sun, sinking into the edge of the mountains, dyed the sky in a vermilion color.

This afternoon, seeing the sea for the first time in his life. Eating cookies that were unexpectedly delicious.

Shin had completely recovered his mood.

"You're quite simple, aren't you?"

Rezeld said in a voice filled with a smile to the side of Shin's face as he gazed contentedly out the window.

"It's better than being in a bad mood, isn't it?"

There was also room to spare in Shin's voice as he answered.

—He himself thought he was simple.

Why was he accompanying them on such a journey? He didn't know himself. That fact was one of the reasons he was irritated—

—Oh well—

He had come to think that way.

Originally, he didn't hate vehicles. He liked Magic-cars, and to be honest, he had been thinking for a long time that he wanted to try riding a train once.

Therefore, if he changed his mindset, this trip wasn't a bad one at all. He had come to be

able to think that way.

"Indeed."

Mei said from the opposite seat, nodding deeply.

"There's a legend that if someone is in a bad mood, it ruins the surrounding atmosphere."

"Even if you talk about 'surrounding atmosphere'..."

"Whoa, how rude. It makes it sound as if I'm someone who can't read the atmosphere."

"Did you actually think you were reading it? After all that?"

"But I'm glad."

Next to Mei, Laphra Lifra also nodded deeply.

"Shindred has finally become aware of his status as the lowest level of the pack."

"Like I'd ever be aware of that. Never."

He realized himself that even the tone of his retort had softened.

If he'd come this far anyway, he might as well just go to the Northern Continent for now and then think about his future. He was even starting to feel that way.

"Anyway, if you've recovered your mood—"

Rezeld, who had started to speak, suddenly changed the direction of his gaze.

Shin also looked that way—

It was nothing much. He just saw a conductor passing through the hallway through the glass window in the door.

During the interior inspection at the station they had stopped at earlier, the blinds of the glass window, which were usually closed, had been left open. That must have felt out of place.

—Come to think of it, Rezeld apparently had the experience of being attacked by an assassin who had transformed into a member of the patrol. Because of that, he had said he was sensitive to similar uniforms.

Rezeld lowered the blinds of the door window, gave a small wry smile, and continued.

"—No problem."

That conductor stopped on the coupling.

It was between car and car, door and door. Of course, there were no other people around—

However.

"I have found them."

The conductor—no, Sezenol, who had stolen the attendant's uniform at Cremol and boarded Mei's train—raised his voice so as not to be drowned out by the sound of the train.

His face and physique were still those of the man he had transformed into before stealing this uniform, but the targets wouldn't know.

"There's no mistake, it's the targets. The second private compartment from the back, on the left side of the fifth car.

Two rooms in a row, the place you enter from the hallway is the sitting room. In the back is the sleeping compartment. Both have windows facing outside."

That was the extent of what he knew now.

But as long as he could confirm the targets' presence, that was enough.

"Anything else?"

The voice mixed in the wind was that of the blue Deva, Soldima.

The wind-swept coupling. No one was visible from there. However, if someone had been looking down from the top of a mountain, they would have seen five shadows clinging to the top of the train.

"No. That's all."

Sezenol said.

He wanted to investigate more, but—

In a past battle, the target had seen through his subordinate, who had transformed into a Hume, as a Deva at a glance. That story had been passed on to Soldima and the others.

Whether that was a coincidence or an inevitability, Sezenol still didn't know—

In any case, there was no need to force an investigation at the risk of having his

identity seen through. He had made that judgment.

"Understood. Then, continue monitoring the targets for a little longer—"

The door suddenly opened, as if to cut off Soldima's voice.

Standing in front of Sezenol was a uniformed—conductor. A real one.

"...And you are?"

Asked suspiciously, Sezenol was momentarily at a loss for words.

To be honest, he didn't fully understand the workings of the railway created by the Humes.

He had stolen the attendant's uniform and boarded the train wearing it simply because he thought he wouldn't be suspected in this form.

But the conductor in front of him was clearly suspicious of him.

How could he say something to get through this situation—

"...I have information that a problematic person is on this train."

Driven by necessity, he lowered his voice and spun a lie.

"I am with the Patrol. I've borrowed this uniform to keep a certain individual under surveillance."

For a split second, the conductor's expression softened as if he were convinced—but before Sezenol could feel relief, the man's brow furrowed again.

"...Wait... if that's the case, why are you wearing a standard station attendant's uniform instead of a conductor's?"

Sezenol fell silent once more.

He had assumed the uniforms were the same—but apparently, there was a distinction between what a regular attendant and a conductor wore. He had no idea what the specific differences were.

Growing suspicious of the silence, the conductor's tone sharpened.

"If that story were true, the station staff would obviously know, and word would have been sent to us ahead of time. If you're really with the Patrol, show me your ID—"

Crunch.

Claws extending from above seized the man's head and twisted. The conductor finally

fell silent.

"Being halfway clever can sometimes be fatal."

As he spoke, Soldima leaned halfway off the roof and dragged the conductor's corpse up top.

"I couldn't fool him. My apologies."

"It couldn't be helped. However—I intended to strike while they slept... but someone is bound to notice this man's absence soon. It's only a matter of time before an uproar begins. In that case, before that happens... we have no choice but to make our move now."

"Shall we destroy the entire train?"

"That is uncertain, and confirming the bodies would be a hassle. If they were to survive, they might use the chaos to slip away. If possible, let us kill them normally. If that proves difficult... then we shall reconsider. I do not mean to underestimate the opponent... but let us teach them that the presence or absence of wings can sometimes create a fatal gap in combat power."

Soldima announced this flatly.

A small window in the compartment door. Seeing a shadow through the cloth blinds, Rezeld felt a vague sense of unease.

He recalled what had happened just a moment ago.

But—thinking about it, it was strange. Since boarding the train, conductors and other passengers had appeared in the hallway countless times. Why was it that only today—ever since leaving Cremol Station—had such a thing started to bother him?

Twitch.

Laphra Lifra suddenly turned around. Her gaze was the same as Rezeld's—beyond the blinds, outside the door.

Rezeld finally realized the source of the dissonance.

It wasn't moving. The shadow. It remained right in front of the door.

"Oh?"

Mei noticed as well and looked toward it.

In that instant.

A spell-ring flickered into existence in the void before the door.

KABOOM!

An explosive sound rocked the train.

At the very last second, Rezeld's shield-type Law-Breaking Arts confined Sezenol's destructive force between the door and the shield—

It was the door, not the contents of the compartment, that was blown away.

Taking that as the signal, attacks of Law-Breaking Arts began to hammer the walls around the doorway.

Shin and the others understood the situation instantly.

The Devas had previously carried out organized attacks on Mei's life. They knew that one of the assassins had survived. They had expected another attack eventually, which was precisely why they were trying to reach the country of Dragno, where the Devas would find it difficult to interfere.

However, just because they were expected and prepared didn't mean they could overturn the disadvantage of this situation.

They were in a cramped private compartment meant only for sitting and sleeping. It was impossible to fight properly in such a place. Yet, stepping out into a hallway too narrow to dodge in would be the same. And of course, they couldn't simply step outside the moving train.

"This is bad! What do we do!?"

Shin said to no one in particular as he pulled a metal cylinder from inside his jacket.

What looked like nothing more than a short iron pipe was an anti-Deva weapon entrusted to him by Rezeld. Known as a Law-Breaking Arts Sword, if one chanted the words and traced the spiral to split it in two from the middle, it would become two blades of light that destroyed only the blood of Devas.

Still—what would happen if he drew it here? What use was a blade that couldn't reach the opponent?

"I'll manage to hold the doorway!" Rezeld shouted. "They'll likely attack with Law-Breaking Arts from outside—the roof or the sides! Lady Mei, please neutralize and interfere with them!"

He was likely the most familiar with the attack patterns of winged beings. After all, he too was originally one of them.

"Got it~"

Responding in a tone devoid of tension, Mei pulled silver rings from inside her clothes and slipped them onto her wrists. Though they looked like mere bracelets, they were actually spell-rings she had crafted herself.

"Mei! Can't we use your spell-rings too, me or Laphra Lifra!?"

"Impossible."

Mei's answer was a blunt denial.

...If she was making them herself anyway, it would have been nice if she'd made them so others could use them... but there was no use saying that now.

"The two of you must stand by for now! That's all you can do!"

The two gnashed their teeth at Rezeld's words.

Suddenly, Mei moved. She hopped onto the seat and held her right palm toward the ceiling—

"Negative."

At her murmur—nothing happened.

And that was exactly right. Shin and the others understood: Mei had just blocked a Law-Breaking Arts spell that someone lurking on the roof was about to unleash.

But that was only a temporary measure.

The path to victory was still nowhere in sight—

From the roof into the train. Unleashing destructive Law-Breaking Arts.

"——Hoh——"

Soldima, leader of the Deva squad and Commander, murmured with interest.

He wasn't actually standing on the roof. He was flying, clinging to the train above the compartment where the targets were, keeping a distance close enough to touch if he reached out. His wings beat the air, and the wind howling in his ears sent his hair streaming back. At this speed, he could easily keep up without needing the acceleration

of Law-Breaking Arts.

The target could negate the offensive Law-Breaking Arts he tried to unleash. He had heard this from Sezenol beforehand. He hadn't disbelieved the story, but actually having one of his strikes blocked was, admittedly, a surprise.

It hadn't been blocked by a shield; the activation itself had been nullified. There were likely few even among the Devas who could do such a thing.

But there was no need to worry. The situation favored them.

According to the reports, the Hume swordsman and the Rewarder were only capable of close-quarters combat. In other words, simply by maintaining distance, those two were effectively neutralized.

The strange sword of light the Hume possessed was apparently not very long. Even if the opponent stabbed through the ceiling from inside, the blade wouldn't reach him here.

The train was now running along a mountainside. To the right, the mountain rose up; to the left, a timbered slope descended toward a canyon.

Soldima waved his hand, giving a signal.

Two sets of wings coming from behind pulled up alongside the left side of the train. They were the remaining two subordinates who had been waiting on the roof further back.

No matter what tricks the target had for nullifying magic, they wouldn't be able to keep up if multiple spells were unleashed simultaneously.

The end was only a matter of time.

"Outside the window!"

Shin was the first to notice.

The sun had already sunk behind the mountains, and the sky was a battleground between the lingering vermilion and the indigo ushered in by the night. Against that backdrop, two sets of black wings flew alongside the train. Even in the fading light, they were close enough for their forms to be clearly seen.

"Tch!"

"Whoa, there's so many!"

Rezeld groaned, and Mei's expression clouded slightly. If they were attacked from outside the window as well, they truly wouldn't be able to keep up. Everyone there understood that.

"Rezeld, can't we get out into the hallway!?"

"It's impossible!"

Shin's question was immediately shot down. The Devas flanking the hallway were maintaining an intermittent barrage of Law-Breaking Arts. The hallway wasn't even wide enough to dodge in. Besides, there was no guarantee that getting into the hallway would improve the situation.

"Then at least the one on top...!"

Shin looked up at the ceiling and prepared to draw his sword, but—

"It's useless! They aren't actually on the roof!"

He reconsidered at Rezeld's words. While the sword was basically harmless to anyone but Devas, it would still cause a shock if the blade of light hit. Swinging it carelessly here would only get in the way of Mei and Rezeld.

The Devas flying outside closed the distance as if taunting them. An attack would come any moment but Laphra Lifra was the first to move.

She grabbed the seat she had been sitting on. She ripped the wooden-framed, cloth-covered seat section, which was fastened to the supporting frame, away with sheer force!

And hurled it out the window at the Devas!

Crash-bang.

Two sounds followed in quick succession: the sound of glass shattering and the sound of the seat colliding with a Deva.

Perhaps the Deva hadn't reacted because they had closed the gap too much. Or perhaps it was so absurd that it was completely unexpected. One Deva tumbled backward. The remaining one hurriedly increased its distance from the train.

"That's one!"

Laphra Lifra howled into the twilight.

Soldima watched the black wings tumble away, clicking his tongue inwardly.

How careless. His subordinates had stayed too close to the train. He had told them that overconfidence would be fatal, but they must have grown careless or impatient.

The attack had come before he could instruct them to pull back. He wasn't sure exactly what the opponent had thrown, but it was a relatively large, box-like object. As for the subordinate who took the direct hit—well, who knew? Aside from the damage of the collision itself, the subordinate had been flying over a canyon. At worst, they had fallen to their death.

But for now, finishing off the targets took priority over checking on a careless subordinate.

Losing one attacker was a blow—but Soldima signaled the remaining subordinate with a glance and began a simultaneous barrage of Law-Breaking Arts.

With a loud noise, a hole opened in the wall by the window. It looked like a person's head could easily pass through. Shin thought this, oddly out of place. Both the window-side and the hallway-side walls were now in tatters.

How much time had passed since the attack began? It felt both agonizingly long and incredibly short. In any case—within it all, Shin was tormented by a sense of powerlessness.

Rezeld and Mei were doing well to block the assassins' attacks, though occasionally they failed, adding more holes to the walls. And Laphra Lifra had driven one off.

What was he doing?

Of course, the reality was that there was nothing he could do. The enemy was out of reach of his weapons. Laphra Lifra had been throwing various objects at the Deva outside the window, but they no longer hit an opponent who kept their distance and stayed alert.

If the train stopped and they could get outside, there might still be a way, but that was a faint hope. Perhaps the driver had noticed the attack, but if so, they would be even less likely to stop. To stop after being attacked would be to accept being overrun.

There was nothing Shin could do now. No, perhaps there was something, but he simply couldn't think of it. Amidst the frustration, all Shin could do was stand there.

They're better than I thought—

Soldima was marveling at the opponent's strength, even as he carefully pruned the seeds of impatience growing in his heart.

Blocking offensive Law-Breaking Arts—it was easy to say, but not easily done. Aside from dodging or hiding, one essentially had to counter Law-Breaking Arts with Law-Breaking Arts.

For example, using a versatile shield. However, the defense was incomplete and could be easily broken depending on the difference in power between users or the type of spell. Alternatively, one could discern the type of offensive spell and create a shield specifically to cancel it out. This could surely neutralize an attack, but it required first identifying the attack and then assembling the counter-spell, making it much more difficult to execute.

And then there was nullifying the activation itself.

It was said to be theoretically possible... but Soldima at least knew of no one who could do it. Except for the target he was currently trying to kill.

But the targets were using these techniques interchangeably to endure their attacks. If this continued, the opponent might eventually make a mistake... but it was also possible they would fail first.

For a while now, the train had been gradually increasing its speed. The driver must have noticed the attack and was trying to outrun it. It wasn't a speed they couldn't keep up with, but night was beginning to dominate the world. This was a bit dangerous.

Though Devas had better night vision than Humes, it was only relative. In the darkness, visibility still worsened. Flying at this height and speed under such conditions, there was a risk of colliding with an overhanging tree branch. It would be pathetic to lose combat power and have the operation collapse because of something so foolish.

They needed to hurry. He didn't much care for being crude, but...

Soldima shifted his flight path slightly—

—Lu-ouhh!

He activated a spell near the hallway inside the train.

—Stubborn—

Sezenol continued his magic attacks, picking off the buds of impatience blooming in his

chest.

He had been maintaining an intermittent barrage from the doorway of a compartment diagonally across from the targets. Positioned to flank the target room, Soldima's subordinates were also attacking. Their immediate goal was to pin the targets in the room. In that sense, the mission was being carried out... but the group outside seemed to be having quite a lot of trouble.

Just as Sezenol unleashed what must have been his umpteenth attack, two small red spheres of light suddenly appeared and vanished near the ceiling of the hallway.

It was the signal from Soldima on top of the train to change plans. Two red lights meant—

—Yuu... rururuuuuuuui...

Once he understood the change, Sezenol drew spell-patterns in the void with both hands and placed the incantation on a thin, long breath.

Before his chest—the spell-pattern sphere manifested in the void, emitting light, then unraveled into several spell-bands that crawled along the walls and floor of the train hallway.

And then.

K-rash!

Along the lines of light, the train's wall, floor, and ceiling were severed.

Two red lights. It signified the execution of the plan to destroy the carriage.

"—This is bad!"

Rezeld's murmur echoed, and in the next instant, the world tilted. Everyone's screams overlapped as walls, floors, and ceilings tore apart.

The Devas intended to cut this private compartment itself off from the train. It was currently barely hanging on in various places, but it wouldn't last. No, more than that, if they did the same thing again, it would truly be the end.

Unable to stand due to the shaking and tilting, Shin and the others crouched down.

BOOM!

The window-side wall blew away with a roar. The rushing wind struck their skin.

Outside, it was already night.

Sezenol clicked his tongue in spite of himself.

He had intended to completely destroy the compartment with a single blow. Was the failure because he didn't fully understand the structure of a train? Or was there another reason?

In any case, the compartment was only half-destroyed—but from the doorway, the Dragnos had vanished.

For a moment, doubt set in. The order was to destroy the compartment, but in this situation, wouldn't it be faster to hammer an explosive-type spell inside rather than destroying the carriage?

I will kill them with my own hands—

To be honest, a part of him still harbored that thought. But he quickly reconsidered. An order was an order. A soldier was only permitted discretion within that scope.

In that case—there should be no complaints if it was a technique that could achieve both goals. Sezenol unleashed an offensive spell that grazed the doorway.

Shin knew an attack was coming. But crouched on the floor, he had no way of doing anything.

And the offensive Law-Breaking Arts unleashed by the Deva—erupted.

Everything shook. The air. The carriage. His entire body.

It was only a moment later that he understood it had been a roar. Light soaked even behind his eyelids, which he had squeezed shut. The floor and the compartment shook precariously.

When the light faded and he realized he was still alive, Shin opened his eyes to see a ring of light and the night sky spreading beyond it.

Mei had apparently deployed a shield at the last second to deflect the blast's power, protecting everyone. The destructive force that should have pulverized them had instead blown away the remaining walls and ceiling of the carriage.

They were safe. But that relief came with a caveat.

For now.

The situation hadn't improved. The four of them were basically sitting on a plank of wood that was somehow still attached to the train. Seeing them exposed, the Deva flying alongside them to the left prepared to fire another spell.

"Not yet!"

Mei vanished her shield and crouched, turning toward them—

It seemed she hadn't considered the wind pressure. The floor shook. Her small body was swept away by the wind. Beyond her, there was no longer a wall to support her.

Her shoes scraped the air for an instant—

"Mei!"

At the last second, Shin's hand caught hers. Simultaneously, he grabbed whatever was nearby—the frame that had supported the seat—with his other hand.

With almost no resistance, the frame snapped away.

Into the night air, the two of them soared.

The wind howled in Shin's ears. All he could see was the vastness of the dark night sky and the vastness of the dark earth. And the girl whose hand he held.

—Ah—

There was no fear. Rather, a strange calm settled in Shin's chest.

Mei's mouth was moving. She seemed to be saying something—but he couldn't hear a thing.

Shin pulled her in with all his might, hugging the girl as if to shield her. If he did this, Mei might survive if they were lucky when they landed. Well, even something like this was better than doing nothing.

Mei's small hands tightly gripped Shin's clothes. She looked up, saying something with a face that looked ready to cry—but again, he couldn't hear due to the wind.

Shin curled his body around Mei—

The impact

Sank Shin's consciousness into darkness.

Staining the night sky white for an instant.

B-BOOM!

The train roof blew away.

Soldima narrowly escaped being caught in it, his cheek twitching. It had likely been Sezenol's doing. It might have been a chance, but he was being reckless.

On the exposed compartment—no, the plank of wood that could no longer be called a room—the target had deployed a magic shield. The subordinate flying to the left made a move. The target tried to turn toward them—and lost her balance.

Another tried to support her in a panic, but—the two of them, hands still joined, were instantly blown back into the darkness.

The two remaining on the plank stared at the spot, stunned.

The targets had fallen from the train.

Their survival was unknown—but regardless, there was no longer any need to bother with the train.

Soldima created a blue sphere of light in the hallway of the train—the agreed-upon signal for retreat—and began to slow his flight speed.

Of course, it wasn't all over. He didn't think the targets could be safe in that situation, but they needed to confirm it and finish them off if they were still breathing.

...However...

In the middle of the mountains, now shrouded in darkness and overgrown with trees... the task of finding the targets, who had been blown away to who-knows-where, was tedious just to think about.

Was it a cry of grief or a howl?

Laphra Lifra's voice was swept away by the night wind. In the night sky, there was a moon. Two of the five moons that circled this land, Crosscadia.

As if praying to that moon, as if lamenting. Laphra Lifra raised her voice.

But.

"—Not yet!"

Rezeld had not yet broken. It seemed all the Devas had gone. He crawled across the

floor into the hallway and reached out a hand to Laphra Lifra.

"It hasn't been decided that those two are dead. In that case, there must still be things we can and should do!"

Laphra Lifra was silent for a while—

Just as she was about to reach for Rezeld's hand, she stopped.

Lying on the floor nearby, snagged on the seat frame, was the metal cylinder Shin had dropped—the Law-Breaking Arts Sword.

Laphra Lifra picked it up—and took Rezeld's hand.

In the mountains, night comes early. Once the sun begins to set, the darkness rapidly expands its territory. The world that had been stained madder-red before the attack was now painted in only two colors: the black of the sky and the dark of the earth.

It wasn't entirely without light. Two round moons hung in the night sky, and a third was beginning to peek out from the eastern sky. Countless stars were scattered across the heavens, and there were several small lights on the sprawling earth.

The lights of the Law-Breaking Arts held by the Devas.

Needless to say, they were there to search for the targets who had fallen from the train. The light was sufficient for indoor use, but looking down from above, they appeared as nothing more than modest white dots in the vast landscape.

"What do you think?"

Soldima, the Commander, suddenly asked Sezenol as they flew together through the night sky. The two of them were not carrying lights. If the targets were in a condition to move, they would move to avoid the searching lights. Thinking this, the two were conducting an aerial patrol without light sources.

It was Soldima's original subordinates who were searching below.

—However, below was a mountain overgrown with trees. It was somewhat doubtful whether they could find the opponent by searching from above.

"Think about what?" Sezenol asked back.

"Do you think they are alive? The targets."

"I don't know."

There was no point in wishful thinking. He answered honestly.

"Given the situation, if the opponent were an ordinary Hume, they would likely be dead. But if the target were an ordinary Hume, such an assassination order wouldn't have been issued in the first place."

"I see," Soldima said with a shrug. "But that target... who on earth are they?"

"For mission execution, it's better to accurately grasp the opponent's abilities. The higher-ups must be aware of that. The fact that they didn't inform us likely means it's something we don't need to know."

"I understand that, of course... but aren't you still interested?"

"I'm not."

"Oh dear..."

"More importantly, the immediate problem is whether we can find the target, dead or alive. The search area is too vast."

"...True... if that's the case, we should have brought some military beasts... well, it's too late to say that now."

Muttering wearily, Soldima looked around. Earth, trees, and mountains. During the day, it would be a magnificent sight, but searching for someone in it at night made it a deeply depressing landscape.

They were searching based on a rough estimate of where the targets might have fallen... he could only pray it wasn't a mistaken guess.

"And, what bothers me is—"

Just then, a blue light appeared in the night void, as if to cut off Sezenol's words. A Law-Breaking Arts signal raised by a searching companion—the signal to gather.

"Let's go."

The two banked their wings and flew toward the white light beneath the blue light. The lights held by the other subordinates were also gathering there.

They passed through the leaves and landed.

Amidst the shadows the light carved into the forest, the standing subordinate turned to the two and spoke.

"...They're dead."

"You seem busy lately."

Being suddenly addressed like that in a corner of a long hallway, Bourgeois, the Foreign Minister of the Devas, stopped in his tracks. The hem of his ceremonial robe, embroidered with spell-patterns in gold and silver thread, brushed the floor.

It was a corner of the royal castle in Assos, the capital of the Deva land, far from the land of Humes. The skylights in the corridor were fitted with translucent crystals for lighting, and while the outside scenery was invisible, plenty of daylight streamed in.

The light created shadows within the castle—and the opponent was in those shadows. Two horns growing from the sides of his head, short-trimmed hair, and a ceremonial robe. The fact that everything looked gray wasn't because he was in the shadows.

"This is—Lord Volden."

Bourgeois called the name of the familiar face. He was the Foreign Minister during the reign of the king before last—Golgajild—and was, so to speak, a great predecessor to him. Being the Foreign Minister during wartime, one didn't hear many good rumors, but everyone recognized his competence.

He must have been quite old by now, but there was no sign of weakness in his legs or wings, and his claws still retained their luster.

Though long retired, he still held the right to enter the royal castle. ...However, perhaps he disliked such things, for Bourgeois hadn't heard of him showing his face here in quite some time...

As Bourgeois was trying to gauge the other's intentions, Volden slowly stepped out into the light, looked toward the skylight, and narrowed his eyes at the brightness.

"It's good weather... I like this time of day best. ...By now, it must be night in the areas where the Humes live."

"Well, I wonder."

Bourgeois spoke evasively, yet he understood. He understood what the old man wanted to talk about—though his true intent was still unclear.

"It's quite a problem. I don't know the reason, but some reckless individuals are causing an uproar in the Hume cities, and thanks to them, I'm being run ragged."

Bourgeois spoke in a conversational tone. The old man likely realized: Bourgeois was the one sending those "reckless individuals." And furthermore, there was someone

giving him orders. Of course, that didn't mean he could speak honestly.

"—Well, they likely have their own intentions," Volden said with a small nod. Looking only at his expression, he seemed like nothing more than an old man enjoying the sun—

"The education of the young is something we old-timers must handle firmly... though it's rude of me to group you with an old man like myself."

The old man chuckled.

"But teaching something to someone is difficult. For example, there is a single blade. Do you consider it dangerous and tell them to throw it away, or do you tell them to use it as a convenient tool? This is—even among old-timers who have lived the same amount of time, opinions are divided."

"A blade that can be handled is indeed a convenient tool. But one that cannot be handled is only dangerous. In that case, such a thing is unnecessary."

Finally understanding what the old man was trying to say, Bourgeois responded.

"Dear me. People lately, unlike us old-timers, are wasteful. If a blade cannot be handled, one should make it so it can. If you find that it cannot be done, only then should you dispose of it."

"There's also the thinking that it's safer to dispose of it before you mishandle it and suffer an irreparable injury."

"I see... to each their own."

Volden wore a gentle smile, and then—

"———Fifty years ago———"

The tone of the old man, who had looked into the distance again, changed.

"That day, I was away from the castle and so my life was spared.

But the King I served and my colleagues vanished, along with the majority of the castle town.

The resentment does not fade. Perhaps it is nothing more than displaced spite. But I... no, we, have no power.

But—

What if there were a blade there that could be used?

Would others not feel the same way?"

"The current King is Gilgazord," Bourgeois replied.

"And we are not the demons found in legends."

"……I see, then……"

The old man seemed to let his shoulders drop slightly.

"But even they—"

He started to speak, but closed his mouth, shook his head slightly from side to side, and turned on his heel.

"……No, no. It was just the rambling of an old man. Forget it."

Bourgeois simply watched in silence as the old man walked away.

It wasn't that he couldn't understand the man's feelings.

But—

What meaning is there in a blade that cannot reach?

A round light.

When he opened his eyes, it took a moment to realize that the thing reflected there was the moon hanging in the night sky.

"You're awake~"

He heard a girl's voice that still held a trace of youth. One he had grown used to hearing lately—

"—Mei!?"

Shin scrambled up in a panic—

And remembered that he and Mei had fallen from the train.

Beneath the hands he leaned on was the sensation of damp earth.

Insects were chirping. Night birds were calling. In the cold, clean night air, the scent of greenery drifted thickly.

"Don't shout. You'll be found."

Hearing that, Shin stopped moving.

That's right. The Devas might still be wandering around. For now, they needed to leave this place. Fortunately, nothing on his body pained him.

He looked toward Mei—and froze on the spot.

Moonlight descended from the heavens. The groves and undergrowth cast shadows. There was Mei, crouching nearby with her head tilted, staring at him. She didn't appear to have any particular injuries.

But, right behind her.

The shadow standing there bore wings upon its back.

"……De……!"

"I told you not to shout."

It was that shadow that stopped Shin just as he was about to scream.

The same voice as before.

"There's no need to be in such a rush~ ……oh?"

He grabbed the hand of the nonchalant Mei, pulled her down, and stepped in between her and the shadow.

He thrust his hand into the inner pocket of his jacket—and realized that the Law-Breaking Arts Sword he usually kept there was gone.

The shadow in front of him did not move. He looked again, but there was no mistake.

A Deva.

Judging by the voice and build, it was a woman. A single horn grew from the right side of her forehead. Her upper body was wrapped in what looked like leather armor, and two large daggers hung in sheaths from each side of the belt at her waist. In the faint moonlight, he couldn't tell what color they were.

She might have been on the somewhat small side for a Deva—but that wasn't any kind of comfort.

He had no weapons at all. Sweat beaded on Shin's forehead.

Then Mei tugged at the hem of his clothes from behind, over and over.

"That's why I said you don't have to rush. She seems like a good Deva."

"A good Deva?"

Hearing a word that was outside the scope of his imagination, Shin reflexively furrowed his brow, without taking his eyes off the Deva in front of him.

"Good grief," the female Deva said wearily. "I save you twice and this is the treatment I get? Well, I suppose it's only natural."

"Twice?" Shin muttered, frowning.

One time—he could more or less imagine. She must have caught Shin and Mei in mid-air after they were dropped from the train. That would explain why both of them were unharmed.

But, the other time?

—Shin did not know. He did not know that the Deva assassin Sezenol had been plotting to derail the train they were on.

Nor did he know that someone had repaired the destroyed tracks using Law-Breaking Arts.

However, the female Deva didn't seem inclined to explain those things.

"Let me ask: are there no criminals among the Humes?"

"……Huh?"

"I am asking if you are all good people.

Among Humes, there are likely good people and bad people. Among Dragnos, there are likely foolish ones and wise ones. Among Rewarders, there must be brave ones and cowards.

In the same way—

Among us Devas, there are those who are your enemies and those who are your allies. It stands to reason, does it not?"

"……"

Shin fell silent at her words.

Well, it was logical. Besides, if the person in front of him were an enemy, Shin would likely never have woken up again.

Even so…… it wasn't as if he could be convinced by that alone.

"If you're an ally, then tell me. Why is Mei being targeted? Why are you taking our side?"

"It is not as if I know everything. Nor am I obligated to tell you everything. And we do not have time for a long talk in a place like this."

"……For saying that, you seem to like talking in circles."

At Shin's irony, the female Deva's brow furrowed slightly, but she continued.

"Even I am not so foolish as to take them all on. The train went that way. Remember the shape of the mountain and move forward using the moon and stars as landmarks."

She pointed in one direction with her finger.

"Once you reunite with your companions, head east. If you cross the mountain, there is a road and a town. It would be wise to head toward your destination by a different route."

Having said that one-sidedly, she turned on her heel.

"—Wait a minute. Aren't you coming?"

"If I accompany you, things will become complicated."

"Hey……!"

By the time Shin tried to run toward her—

Whish!

With the sound of beating the night wind, the black wings had soared higher than the trees.

Just like that, she was out of sight.

In the end, he hadn't even asked her name.

—Well, given her attitude, it was doubtful she would have answered even if he had asked.

He suddenly sensed something. Turning his eyes, he saw Mei, who had come right up beside him, staring up at him.

"……What is it?"

"No. It's not 'what is it.' Rejoin."

"—Ah."

That was certainly true. If they stayed still in a place like this, there was no telling when the assassins' search would reach them.

"Can you walk? You're not hurt anywhere?"

"Mm. I'm okay."

"Then let's go."

With that, Shin turned and began to climb the slope. But before they had gone far, Mei, who was following him, tugged at his hem.

"Wait. This is a different direction from what the Deva lady said."

"It's fine.

Where we are now is on the valley side of the tracks, right?

First, we cross the tracks. Then, if we travel along the mountain side of the tracks, the risk of running into the Devas…… or rather, the assassins, will be lower. Because they'll search the valley side where we tumbled down."

"Oh~" Mei let out a voice of admiration. "You're pretty smart for a Subordinate Three."

"Give me a break…… anyway, let's go."

Mei gripped Shin's sleeve tightly as he started walking again. He thought about shaking her off, but in these dark mountains, it would be bad if they got separated by some chance. He reluctantly let it be.

"Hmm. But it's good that you finally seem to have developed an awareness of being a subordinate."

"Who has?"

As they went along the pathless way, Shin put a retort into his breath at Mei's sleep-talking.

"Because.

When we fell, you tried to protect me."

Shin's feet almost stopped. She remembered something unnecessary.

"……It would be boring for both of us to die for nothing."

Shin said bluntly while looking straight ahead.

"At least one of us had to survive.

I thought about using you as a cushion, but you were too tiny, so I couldn't."

"Wow. That's mean.

Hmph. I was thinking about ranking you up as a subordinate, too. Never mind."

"Like I said. I'm not a subordinate."

While trading quips, their feet pressed firmly into the slope.

Even so—can they really reunite with Rezeld and the others? Even if they can, just how far do they have to go before then?

The end of the road was still not in sight.

"The problem is……"

Looking all around at the night, Rezeld muttered.

"How and where to search."

The tracks continued in a curve. To the left and right were clusters of trees. The only light came from the moon and stars. The night was infinitely deep.

Rezeld and Laphra Lifra were now walking along the tracks.

Needless to say, it was to look for Mei and Shin.

He had tried to negotiate directly with one of the conductors, telling him to stop the train because their companions had fallen off, but the conductor, terrified by the Deva attack, would not agree. He thought about speaking directly to the driver, but it would likely be the same.

However, the station where the train was supposed to stop was still far ahead.

Left with no choice, the two waited for the timing when the train slowed down and jumped off the very end.

But by then, they were already quite far from where Mei and the others had fallen.

For the time being, they were heading back along the tracks, but……

The area they had to search was dauntingly vast.

He was currently in Hume form through Transformation Law-Breaking Arts, but Rezeld's night vision was still sharp. Even so, that didn't mean much in front of the obstacle of countless trees.

"—That's it! Laphra Lifra."

Struck by a sudden thought, Rezeld asked her as she walked beside him.

"Can't you pick up Mei's scent?"

"Impossible," she snapped back grumpily. "Something like that is for a dog."

—Wh-whaaaat!?

Rezeld almost raised his voice.

After all that dog-like behavior, and even after the person herself claimed that her form after half-beastification was a dog, to be told here that doing something like a dog was impossible——

"……Could that just now have been a Rewarder-style joke?"

He asked just to be sure. But,

"Not a joke," she replied with a serious face.

……Could it be……

Rezeld suddenly thought of something.

With a suppressed groan, weight bore down on his left arm. She probably lost her footing in the undergrowth.

Shin stopped and turned around.

"Shall we rest for a bit?"

"……I…… am…… not…… tired…… at…… all…… but…… if…… you…… insist……"

Mei replied while clinging to Shin's left arm and panting heavily. Her "brave face" was quite impressive at this point.

When Shin sat down at the base of a nearby tree, Mei crouched down next to him.

How much time had passed since they started walking? A fourth moon was already rising in the sky.

Mountain paths are a bit tough for the uninitiated. Even more so if there isn't even a

path.

Because there had been "mountain path running" in his training school classes, Shin was at least somewhat used to it, but it must be a grueling march for Mei.

Of course, they were being pursued by Devas. They couldn't afford to be slow, but at this rate, it looked like it would be a long haul. It would be bad if she pushed herself too hard here and injured her leg, interfering with their later movements.

The scent of earth was strong.

Sitting on the damp grass and looking down the slope, there was a silver line deep in the thicket.

The tracks extending while reflecting the moonlight.

The two had been moving along the mountain side of those tracks. The risk of being found by the Devas shouldn't be very high, but……

By the same token, isn't the possibility of reuniting with Rezeld and Laphra Lifra also not very high?

He didn't know how those two had moved after he and Mei fell from the train.

Did they give up, thinking they were dead? Or are they searching for them, believing they are alive? He felt that the "loyal dog" Laphra Lifra would be worried about Mei and would search persistently.

But even if they intended to search for Shin—or rather, Mei—would the train stop for them? Or would they turn back from the next station to look? How far ahead was the next station?

Even if they were looking, would they actually be able to meet again in such a damnably vast forest?

The more he thought about it, the more depressed he became.

That female Deva from before; if she said she was an ally, she could have provided a bit more service. Like showing them the way……

"……Hey…… can't you solve this in one go with that mysterious power of yours, like you did before?"

Shin asked, figuring it was worth a shot.

Previously, Mei had displayed an unknown power in front of Shin, instantly healing her

own wounds and driving off a Deva assassin.

—Well, she herself didn't seem to know how she did it, and it had only happened that once……

But there was no answer from Mei. When he looked, the girl was leaning her back against the tree trunk, letting out soft little snores. She must have been exhausted after all.

"……I'm stumped……"

Muttering, Shin scratched his head.

The mountains are cold at night. He hadn't noticed while they were walking, but now that they were resting, he felt the chill. If she slept in a place like this, her body would surely get cold…… but on the other hand, it felt cruel to wake her up.

The breath of the plants added moisture to the night wind, and the voices of insects or birds that were unfamiliar to Shin filled the night mountain.

How long had it been since then——

——I really should wake her up——

Just as Shin was about to put his hand on Mei's shoulder.

He heard a sound. The sound of rustling leaves.

He stiffened and listened intently.

Was it his imagination?

He thought so for a moment—but immediately realized it wasn't.

The insects were silent.

The sound came again.

——This is bad——

Sweat beaded on Shin's forehead.

Something was there. Definitely.

It would be fine if it were Rezeld and the others, but it was hard to imagine they could reunite this quickly. Nor was it likely the female Deva who called herself an ally had come back. Then—

It seemed they needed to hide, but first he had to wake Mei. If she made a sound in her

sleep when he did——

Shin first covered Mei's mouth gently with his right palm.

"……Nn?"

"Shh."

He gave a signal for silence to the girl who had woken up.

The groves cast black shadows, and the moonlight leaking through the gaps in the leaves carved shadows into the world—something moved—

"Is it…… around here?"

"No mistake."

The voices he heard were familiar.

"—You guys!"

Shin let out a voice without thinking. Beyond the groves, there was a sense of someone catching their breath for an instant.

The undergrowth rustled, and the ones who finally appeared there were—

Rezeld, and for some reason, a half-beastified Laphra Lifra.

"Shindred!"

However, the voice Laphra Lifra raised was somehow filled with anger.

"What are you doing to Mei!"

"Eh."

Having it pointed out, he suddenly realized. This pose, forcibly covering Mei's mouth. From an outsider's perspective, it might indeed appear to be a less-than-peaceful scene.

As he hurriedly let go of her,

"Um. I was led around the mountains and then had my mouth held while I was sleeping~"

Mei gave a misleading explanation in an extremely cheerful tone.

An aura of murderous intent drifted up from Laphra Lifra's entire body.

"You! This is no time for jokes. There might still be Devas nearby! Let's put aside the

detailed stories and just get away from here!"

If his explanation was even a moment late, he'd be killed by Laphra Lifra. While thinking that half-seriously, Shin spoke rapidly.

"Eh, a joke?"

Laphra Lifra's voice sounded deflated.

"I'll explain while we walk. Anyway—"

Remembering what the female Deva had said,

"If we cross the mountain and go east, there should be a town. We'll come out there and change our route."

As he spoke, he took Mei's hand and pulled her up.

"How do you know such a thing?"

"I'll explain that properly too."

Answering Rezeld's question, Shin started walking while still holding Mei's hand. If he pulled Mei along for now, Rezeld and Laphra Lifra would surely follow.

Just as expected, the two began walking after Shin and the others.

"But, Rafu-Rifu~"

"It's Laphra Lifra," Laphra Lifra corrected her after Mei called out to her.

"Why the transformation?"

"To look for Mei."

"?"

"It seemed that her nose didn't work very well in human form," Rezeld answered.

"……I mean, compared to when she's in beast form. At any rate, once she beastified, she immediately caught your scent mixed in the wind."

"Oh~. As expected of Subordinate Two."

"It's nothing much."

Laphra Lifra said, praised by Mei. Although she was being humble, her tail, peeking out from the hem of her loose clothes, was wagging back and forth.

"Yes, and. Shindred, you dropped something."

With that, Laphra Lifra threw something toward Shin. When he caught it with his free hand, it was a metal cylinder—the Law-Breaking Arts Sword.

He had apparently dropped it inside the train. It was a weapon that wasn't particularly useful, but even so, it was much better than having nothing.

"Thanks."

He tucked it firmly into the inner pocket of his jacket this time.

"It's not enough to be thanked for."

Again, her tail wagged.

"So, what happened on your end? Even though you fell from the train in that state, from what I can see, neither of you seems to be injured."

Asked by Rezeld, Shin hesitated for a moment. Should he talk about that female Deva or not?

Laphra Lifra wouldn't care, but Rezeld would naturally be suspicious. Even Shin hadn't fully believed in that female Deva.

But he soon realized it was a pointless worry. Even if Shin kept quiet about the female Deva, Mei would talk. She definitely would. She'd talk away quite casually.

"……Listen calmly…… because honestly, I'm a bit confused too."

After giving that preface, Shin began to tell the story of what had happened.

When he looked up, there was already a fourth moon in the sky. It was already past midnight, and the search had yielded no results.

Sezenol banked his wings and approached Soldima, who was also patrolling above the forest.

"Are you still going to continue the search?"

"You mean to say it's useless?" Soldima asked back.

Shortly after the search began, the body of the subordinate who had been shot down during the attack was found, but the targets still hadn't been discovered.

"There is something bothering me," Sezenol said. It was what he was about to say just

before the subordinate's body was found—

But before he could continue,

"You mean the 'someone' who repaired the tracks," Soldima snatched the words.

He had already reported that someone had repaired the tracks when Sezenol tried to derail the train by himself. He had thought that Soldima might have forgotten about it or wasn't taking it seriously, but—

"There might have been a collaborator outside the train as well. And you're saying there's a possibility they saved the targets who fell from the train..... that's what you want to say, right?"

"Yes."

"The possibility cannot be denied. But it is also highly possible that the targets are simply tumbled around this area and we just haven't been able to find them. The point is which one to prioritize."

"....."

"Searching requires manpower. Therefore—

I'd like you to go by yourself to check on the train the targets were on."

"Check the train?"

Sezenol furrowed his brow at the unexpected words. He had thought he would be dismissed with an order to continue the search here.

"Yes.

If the targets are still alive and aiming for the land of Dragno, they will inevitably need to use some form of transportation. The primary candidate is still the train.

Are the target's companions still on the train? If not, what is their trail?

Is there any chance the targets somehow deceived us and are back on the train?

Are there any other ways to head north besides the train?

There are many things to investigate. Someone has to do it.

If you're found by the other side while acting alone, there's a risk of being picked off individually..... but you can probably handle that well, right?"

".....You're good at using people."

"Is that so?"

While speaking, Soldima took a small pendant from his pocket and threw it to Sezenol.

"You know how to use it, right?"

"Yeah."

It was a signal pendant for simple communication. If one traced the spell-patterns carved on the edge and spoke a simple incantation, the matching pendants made from the same silver at the same time would be dyed various colors—red, blue, and so on—by the incantation.

"Let's see…… regardless of the reason, a blue signal means 'assemble here,' yellow means 'I'll join you,' and red means…… 'contact with the enemy.' Communication from this side will be the same.

We will continue the search here.

If there are no results in particular, please return here in two days."

"Understood."

With a reply, Sezenol drew an acceleration spell-ring in the void and raced toward the edge of the night sky.

The sky was beginning to brighten.

Birds announcing the morning had begun to chirp here and there.

The sound of treading on undergrowth. And several ragged breaths.

"……I wonder if there's…… really…… a town……"

Mei's voice, which she muttered, was heavy with fatigue.

"You're the one who said she's a 'good Deva,'" Shin replied, his words also showing signs of exhaustion.

"……That's true…… but just because she's a good Deva…… doesn't mean…… she only tells the truth……"

"What the heck is that supposed to mean……?"

"But it might be possible," Rezeld, who was in the lead, said without even turning around.

While no fatigue could be felt in his voice, it seemed he no longer had the leeway to turn around.

Along the way, Shin had more or less explained to Rezeld and Laphra Lifra that it seemed he had been helped by a female Deva, but—

"A Female Deva, telling, lies?" Laphra Lifra, at the very back, asked.

"Even if she's not lying, I think there's a possibility that her sense of distance is different," Rezeld said.

"Because having wings and flying through the sky is completely different from having to walk the same distance, in terms of both the time it takes and the level of fatigue. Besides, come to think of it, that female Deva didn't say whether the town was near or far, did she?"

"……I guess so…… which means……"

Shin stopped before finishing.

—He didn't know how much they had to walk before reaching the town—

If he said those words, it felt like his legs, his perseverance, and various other things would break.

Everyone was tired. Since the four had reunited, they had walked through the mountains all night, albeit with rests.

On top of that, the mountain air, where countless plants breathed repeatedly, was full of dew, and everyone's clothes had absorbed it, becoming heavy and cold, stealing their body heat.

The only salvation was that they seemed to have somehow shaken off the Devas.

At any rate, they had crossed the mountain, and now a descent continued. They had found a mountain path a while ago and were following it, but—

"Well, at least it's unlikely we're being deceived. Even if it's just a mountain path, the fact that there is a road means it leads somewhere."

"Anyway, walk. Then, arrive." Laphra Lifra followed Rezeld.

"That's how it is."

Rezeld pushed aside the tree branches overhanging the left and right of the path—

And light shone through.

The direction the mountain path extended. Sunlight was leaking through the gaps in the greenery covering the way.

Without anyone saying anything, their pace quickened.

Rezeld pushed away the tree branches—

And everyone stopped on the spot in spite of themselves.

The ridgeline was shining. The light illuminating the rows of trees sandwiched between mountains was spreading. Eventually, the domain of the spreading light illuminated what had been hidden and surrounded by green.

"—It's a town—"

Who was it that muttered that?

Below them, although there was still a distance—

The roofs of the buildings lined up were shining, bathed in dew and the morning sun—

—The light is strong.

It wasn't just the sun; it was also because of the sea spreading out and reflecting the sunlight.

The city of Lionia is sandwiched between the sea and the mountains. It is a city that embraces a large cathedral at the foot of the mountain and has numerous fishing boats lined up in the harbor.

It was about ten days after the train attack that Shin and the other three arrived here.

Most of their luggage had been lost in that commotion, but fortunately, Rezeld had kept his wallet properly. Thanks to that, the journey after crossing the mountain was generally smooth. Using stagecoaches and the like, the group reached this port town today without any major trouble along the way.

Even so, they were significantly behind their original schedule. If they had proceeded smoothly, they would have already been on a ship, crossing the sea. But there was no use saying that now.

The problem is from here on. How to cross the sea.

Initially, they had planned to go to a town further north. Regular ferry services to the northern continent depart from there. But because of that, there was a high possibility

that the town was being monitored by Devas.

If possible, they wanted to find a ship to cross to the northern continent here. So, Rezeld immediately began negotiations.

"Northern continent? You've gotta be joking."

Whether a fishing boat or a passenger ship.

"If you go a bit further north, there's a port with regular flights. I could take you that far..... but definitely not to the northern continent."

He had tried talking to various people, but—

"No way, idiot."

Not many good answers were returned.

".....Well, I suppose there wouldn't be anyone wanting to go."

In a small diner at the port, where they stopped after getting tired of fruitless negotiations.

When Rezeld said they were looking for a ship to cross to the northern continent, the old owner said that with a wry smile on his face, which was buried in wrinkles and a white beard.

It was just past noon, but the only customers were the four of them. Perhaps it was a shop that wasn't very popular, or perhaps the life cycle of the people working in the port was simply out of sync with the normal one.

However, he could probably get at least some information. So Rezeld was hopeful.

"Is there some kind of ominous omen?" Rezeld asked at the counter while picking at the seafood sauté he was served.

"It's not exactly a jinx. Fifty years ago..... there was a big war. This area became the battlefield for it."

The old man's words caused Rezeld's body to stiffen slightly.

The old man had likely realized that Rezeld was no ordinary Hume. Yet, he continued matter-of-factly:

"Old folks like us, we've actually experienced it. Then we pass it down to our children and grandchildren—what happened, how it was. When that happens, naturally... you don't exactly hold warm feelings for the lot over there, and you certainly don't feel like

visiting, do you? It's not just this city. It's pretty much the same everywhere around here."

In the war fifty years ago, this region had been a battlefield where Humes, Dragnos, and Devas were entangled in a recurring cycle of combat. Among them, the Humes—possessing the lowest combat capability—had naturally suffered the greatest damage.

Shin had learned about such things in school. However:

"But I heard there are regular ferry services from the city to the north..."

Shin asked this while eating a vegetable salad topped with pieces of bread toasted to a fragrant crisp, serving as croutons.

"That's because it's something the central government bureaucracy is doing. ...Here, sorry for the wait."

Across the counter, the old man placed a slab of pork ribs in front of Laphra Lifra, seasoned simply with black pepper and coarse salt and slow-roasted.

"It's part of that 'Ethnic Friendship Policy' thing. It seems they run one flight a week, but... in reality, there are almost no passengers."

Mei seemed uninterested in the conversation, busy struggling with a piping hot seafood gratin.

"I thought a place like this would be good for gathering information—"

Rezeld said, carving a piece of whitefish.

"Do you know anyone who might be open to such a proposal? Of course, we would offer appropriate compensation. Both to the person who accepts and to the one who introduces us."

"Hmm."

The old man stared at Rezeld for a moment.

"Circumstances, I take it?"

"A few." Rezeld answered briefly.

The old man fell silent for a while—

"I close the shop in the evening. Come back around then."

"We will do so." Nodding, Rezeld dropped the subject then and there.

As the sun touched the edge of the mountains, the vast sea reflected the sky and stained it the color of vermilion.

Morning comes early to the harbor, and night falls early as well.

The fishermen had already headed home early, preparing for the next morning—or rather, the pre-dawn departure.

There were no signs of people in the evening harbor.

The small diner, colored by the madder red of dusk, looked even lonelier than it had during the day. On its front door—

"Closed."

Mei read the characters on the small plate out loud.

"That's what it says, indeed."

Saying this, Rezeld put his hand on the door without seeming concerned.

As expected, it was unlocked.

"—Ah. Sorry, but could the last person lock up?"

The voice of the old shopkeeper came from the back of the store.

The four entered, and Shin, at the rear, locked the door.

The blinds were already drawn over the windows facing the sea, and the light of a lamp illuminated the old man waiting behind the counter.

"Well, please take a seat over there."

At the back table the old man gestured toward, there was already one guest.

An extra chair had been placed next to a four-person seat. The middle-aged man sitting at the far end bowed to them.

He was slightly stout, but the gentle smile he wore suited him well.

Shin recognized the dull, dark green robe the man wore.

Burgess City, where he had lived, was a fairly large city with several churches of various denominations, both large and small. One of the fathers from those churches

must have worn a similar robe.

"You have come at a good time."

Waiting for Shin and the others to sit, the robed man spoke in the tone of small talk.

"Nice to meet you. I am Marsei, a First-Class Father. As you likely already know, the cathedral in this city is the headquarters of the Lion religion—"

Incidentally, Shin didn't know. Well, it didn't matter.

He knew the name of the Lion religion. It was a teaching that revered Lufard-Lion, one of the gods who appeared in fairy-tale-like myths. To put it the other way, that was the extent of his knowledge.

Father Marsei began to speak without even asking their names.

"A thanksgiving festival for Lord Lufard-Lion is held here once a year. Lord Lufard-Lion has been considered the goddess of life since ancient times, and even in this land, she draws the faith of people praying for good fishing and bountiful harvests—"

...This is going to be a long story, man...

Shin muttered in his heart at the "blessed" talk the Father had started.

To be honest, he had no interest in long, moralizing stories. As a child, he had quite liked the myths his mother told him as fairy tales—stories of how the gods created the land and moon of Crosscadia, or how they fought and defeated demons.

Lufard-Lion, Ishult, Mareia... there were others too, but various gods like that appeared and performed great feats. Although they were called myths, they were closer to fairy tales than religious accounts or sermons.

There were sects that enshrined each god—come to think of it, he remembered being surprised to hear that Dragno had the same religious system...

But why is it that myths and trivia are quite interesting, yet when it turns into the sermons associated with them, it suddenly feels boring?

While thinking about various trivial things to distract himself from the boredom of the long, "beneficial" lecture—

Suddenly, Shin noticed something.

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

Specifically, it was Mei.

The long talk the Father had started. Rezeld would likely stay quiet, and Laphra Lifra would probably just listen idly without thinking about anything.

But usually, Mei would be making retorts or interruptions regardless of the mood.

There was none of that.

When he looked, the girl even seemed to be listening to the story with a serious expression.

—Impossible—!

Shin's face distorted in shock.

However, Father Marsei, seeing the change in his expression, apparently took it as a sign of displeasure. He cleared his throat slightly and said:

"...Excuse me. I've strayed from the subject. Just a habit of mine. My apologies."

He turned his gaze away from Shin.

Incidentally, Shin had often been told by his classmates that it was "scary" when he stood silently by. Perhaps he looked that way now as well.

The Father turned his whole body toward Rezeld.

"...At any rate, the thanksgiving festival for Lord Lufard-Lion takes place four days from now. The following day, seven representatives chosen from among us will cross by ship to the northern continent for an exchange study session."

Finally, it seemed he had reached the main point. Shin focused his attention on the conversation.

"It is not well known, but the same religion as ours has actually taken root among the Dragnos as well. There are differences in doctrine and ritual styles, but there is no difference in the fact that we devote ourselves to the same god—Lord Lufard-Lion. Therefore, if we exchange opinions and study together, it will surely lead each other's doctrines to higher heights."

...It looked like it was going to be a long story again.

Whether sensing that or not—

"Do you not use the regular ferry from the northern city?"

Rezeld interrupted.

However, the other party didn't seem to take offense.

"Yes. Study begins from the moment we depart, so at that point, we sever ties with the secular world. Because of that, we head directly by ship from here to a town on the northern continent."

"I see. Severing ties with the secular world, then."

Rezeld said with a convinced face, though it was unclear what exactly he "saw."

The Father maintained his smile.

"Yes. Therefore, if someone unrelated asks us to let them on because they'll pay money, we have no choice but to refuse."

"Wait...!?"

Shin began to raise a voice of protest, but Rezeld restrained him with a hand.

"However, if one who has devoted themselves to Lufard-Lion offers alms and begs for assistance, you wouldn't do something like abandon them, would you?"

"Of course not. If one can see heartfelt sincerity in the other person."

The Father nodded satisfyingly.

...I see. So that's how it is...

Shin also understood, feeling halfway exasperated.

Even if it was just for appearances, if they joined their sect and gave "sincere alms"—meaning, paid a decent amount of money—they could get on the ship. That was the gist of it.

To put it plainly, it was a matter of face, or rather, a pretext.

The bottom line was—

It seemed the talk was going to conclude successfully.

The time just before a festival begins is the most fun.

Who was it that said that?

Four days after Shin and the others arrived—the day of the festival.

Even here in Lionia, from that morning, the whole city was wrapped in a festive atmosphere.

Adults putting up decorations. Flags and ornaments mimicking flowers and plants colored the buildings and streets. Children frolicking more than usual. Houses lined up potted flowers at their doorways, and fireworks went off somewhere before it was even noon.

In the afternoon, at an hour still too early to call evening, stalls began to line the streets.

Skewers, crepes, sweet corn, fruit juice cooled with ice. Toys that slid down iron bars with a clatter. Windmills spinning in the sea breeze.

Shin lost count of how many times he caught Mei by the back of her collar to stop her from running headlong toward the stalls.

Rezeld had divided the contents of his wallet among Shin, Mei, and Laphra Lifra. This was out of consideration that it would be a problem if they were penniless if the four were separated again.

However, that also included the risk of someone running off to waste money...

"It's quite lively again, isn't it?"

"Is it? —Come to think of it, Rezeld, is this your first time at a festival over here?"

Walking idly along the central street, which had quite a bit of foot traffic even before dusk, Shin spoke with a skewer in one hand.

...Shin had stopped Mei's charge toward the stalls, but naturally, no one could stop Laphra Lifra's charge. As a result, following Laphra Lifra's rule of "sharing the prey with the pack," skewers of Lionia Black Chicken found their way into everyone's hands.

It had been four days since the ship arrangements were made. Shin and the others had spent their days quietly at an inn on the edge of town. Nothing had happened during that time up until today.

Of course, that was no guarantee they had shaken off the Deva's pursuit. It wasn't a situation where they could let their guard down—but they hadn't come out like this just to enjoy the festival.

The four were currently wrapped in the robes for believers they had received from Father Marsei, with their hoods pulled down low. They were light green, likely for general believers.

Normally, that would be a conspicuous appearance, but in this city, where the headquarters of the Lion religion was located, it was a common sight specifically on this day.

The moment Rezeld handed over half of the advance payment... rather, the "sincere alms," the Father performed a simple, perfunctory baptism for the four, gave them robes for each person, and informed them of the boarding arrangements.

Tonight, when the festival ends. They were to go to the harbor in this attire, board the ship, and wait for the pre-dawn departure.

They had already checked out of the inn and were prepared for travel. In other words, Shin and the others had nowhere to go until the festival ended. Therefore, the logic was that it wouldn't hurt to enjoy the festival a little to vent the frustration of being cooped up in the inn for four days.

Looking around curiously, Rezeld nodded at Shin's words.

"I heard there were festivals in Burgess City too... but things turned out like this before I could experience one. But as I thought, it's quite different from our festivals. More than anything, we don't have such a large population... the amount of people, or rather, the liveliness, is completely different."

"By the way, Sindred."

Laphra Lifra, who had finished her skewer easily and was looking around, pointed with her eyes toward the eaves of the houses.

"Why are flowers put out front?"

Certainly, every single house had potted plants lined up that hadn't been there yesterday.

Shin had noticed that too, but:

"I don't know."

At the blunt answer, Laphra Lifra raised her eyebrows in dissatisfaction.

"Don't know? Even though you're a Hume? Useless."

"It can't be helped. It's my first time in this city too, and even for festivals, there are likely various differences in how they're done depending on the place. It's just for show or something."

"—This is just a guess—" Rezeld spoke up next to the defiant Shin.

"Since Lufard-Lion is a goddess of life, perhaps it's because plants are symbols of life..."

"Ooooh!" Mei and Laphra Lifra harmonized their voices in admiration.

Laphra Lifra looked at Shin out of the corner of her eye.

"...As expected, different from, Subordinate Three. How useful."

"Shut up. Anyway, if you wanted to hear about the origin of the festival, you should have just asked that Father whatever-his-name-was."

"Father Marsei?" Rezeld said. "But he didn't seem very interested in associating with us."

"Well, things would be bad in various ways until we get on the ship." Saying this, Shin gave a small shrug.

Naturally, Shin and the others boarding the ship were not officially sanctioned by the church. Those involved were Father Marsei and, at most, the crew members.

If Shin and the others loitered around Marsei and the matter was discovered by someone above him... this deal would likely fall through. That would result in nothing but bad news for both Marsei and Shin's group.

"In any case, once we're on the ship, there should be plenty of time. If you want to hear it, you can just ask then. Anyway, let's enjoy the festival until it's time."

"I agree~"

"Understood."

"But everyone, please don't waste too much money."

While wandering the streets and looking around, the stalls and crowds gradually increased.

Bang. Pop-pop-bang.

A particularly loud firework went off around the time the color of the sky began to fade.

Pushing through the crowded streets, the city's patrol officers were going around lighting the streetlamps.

The cheers of something far away could be heard on the wind. That direction was likely—toward the Lufard-Lion Cathedral.

Come to think of it, he felt like the innkeeper had said something about a procession of a palanquin car from the Lion religion cathedral on the mountain side of the city down

to the sea.

While Mei almost got lost, Laphra Lifra almost got lost, and Shin—who had complained plenty about them—almost got lost and was complained to by the two, something large eventually appeared from the end of the main street along with the singing of hymns.

"What's that?"

"Can't see."

"It's in the shape of a person."

"Is it a divine statue?"

The four raised their voices to avoid being drowned out by the buzz of the crowd filling the area.

The sun had already sunk behind the mountain ridge, leaving only the afterglow of light. The masters of the sky were changing to the moon and stars.

Eventually, what appeared from the end of the road—

First, children and women wrapped in robes. The clear chorus of hymns vibrated in the night wind, which had grown cooler.

Following them were dozens or hundreds of people pulling several long ropes. On the large wagon being towed, what looked like a large divine statue was enshrined.

A statue of a goddess, kneeling and reaching out both hands toward the earth. On her back was a pair of bird-like wings.

The size, including the height of the wagon, was about that of a two-story house.

It looked like a papier-mâché structure on a wooden frame, but at this size, it was indeed quite imposing.

The wagon around the statue was covered in brilliant green grass, and around it, women in green robes walked with baskets filled with the same grass in their hands.

"...Is that the statue of Lufard-Lion?"

"Probably."

Shin gave a perfunctory nod to Rezeld, who murmured upon seeing the goddess statue. Well, even Shin hadn't seen a statue of Lufard-Lion, but surely they wouldn't pull a feint and show a different god at a festival like this.

"I see. It's quite interesting," Rezeld said.

"What is?"

"We have a faith in Lufard-Lion over on our side too—well, a goddess is a goddess, but the statue takes the form of a four-winged Dragno."

"Heh... human here, Dragno there. In the Deva country, maybe she takes the form of a Deva."

"Could be."

The two imagined it and couldn't help but chuckle.

"Speaking of which, Laphra Lifra, how was it over there?"

Shin asked on a sudden whim. However, Laphra Lifra shook her head from side to side.

"Laphra Lifra, never seen, Lufard-Lion."

"...Is there no festival like this?"

"None."

Shin knew that Rewarders had unique cultures and customs, but did they not even have festivals? Or did she mean they didn't have such noisy festivals?

"By the way, what's that grass?"

Since she couldn't see well because of the crowd, Mei asked Shin while standing on her tiptoes and hopping up and down.

"It's glowing."

"Huh?"

It's not glowing. Just an optical illusion.

Shin stopped those words at his throat.

Brilliant green grass. Looking closely at what filled the base of the divine statue under the darkening sky, it really was emitting a faint light.

"—Lumine-weed, huh—"

Without realizing it, the name had slipped from Shin's mouth.

Long ago, one of his classmates had obtained it from somewhere and was bragging about it. He remembered the trivia he was told then.

"I think... it's a floating weed that grows in the sea, and after it goes to seed, it glows faintly like that for a while. It seems to have quite strong reproductive power... so just like Rezeld said earlier, maybe it's a symbol of life or something."

"Heeey."

The other three chimed in as if impressed.

"You're surprisingly knowledgeable, Sindred."

"Cheeky."

"It's unlike you, I mean."

"...You guys..."

As they talked, the palanquin wagon eventually passed in front of them. People began to walk after it as if led.

The four also followed, buying food at stalls along the way, playing a suction-cup dart game, Laphra Lifra knocking out a man who tried to pick her up with a single blow, and soothing Mei who was throwing a tantrum wanting to do chick-scooping. Eventually, the palanquin and the people stopped along the river mouth that flowed into the sea.

Naturally, the progress of the large palanquin was by no means fast. By the time the car stopped, several moons were already hanging in the sky.

The women in robes who had surrounded the wagon received alms from the gathered people, and in exchange, they handed out a single clump of the floating weed, either from the baskets or from the base of the statue.

The people who received the floating weed held it up, meditated on something, prayed, and then set it adrift on the nearby river surface.

"They're letting them flow," Mei whispered.

This was likely the end of the festival.

Unlike the street lined with lit stalls, the river barely reflected the lights on the shore on its swaying surface. The floating weeds with their thin light bobbed on the black river surface, soon flowing out to the sea—

Eventually, the sea was stained with countless small, faint lights.

The people gathered by the riverside and watched the sea of light forever and ever—

"You may come out now."

The voice was heard at the same time as the creaking of the door. Standing in the doorway with a thin light behind him was the familiar figure of Father Marsei.

"...I've been waiting for those words."

With Rezeld's fed-up mutter, the four sat up inside the dark warehouse.

Last night, after the floating weed release of the festival had ended and they had seen the divine statue head back, Shin and the other three headed toward the edge of the harbor. At a place where the lights of the festival lining the city didn't reach, a medium-sized ship was anchored. When Rezeld identified himself to an unfamiliar robed figure on the lighter, they were led to this place inside the ship and told to wait until they were called.

It was likely a warehouse—not very spacious—at the bottom of the ship. Several wooden crates filled with something were piled up, but it wasn't so cramped that they couldn't help it.

However—

Even if it was anchored, it would naturally sway on the sea. Furthermore, a warehouse has no windows, is dark, and has poor ventilation. A single lamp had been placed there as a token gesture, but the flickering flame only served to make the swaying of the ship itself feel even larger.

Perhaps fish had been loaded there before; the room was somewhat fishy. The strange smell, the darkness, the swaying. They managed to force themselves to sleep, but eventually Mei shook Shin awake and started saying she felt "seasick."

Just when everyone was flustered about what to do—the door finally opened.

Led by Marsei, Laphra Lifra left the room while supporting Mei, who was holding her mouth. Shin and Rezeld followed.

"I've been on a ship before when I came over here, so I'm somewhat used to it... Sindred, are you alright?"

"Seasickness? Yeah. There was a huge lake in the city, right? I used to play there a lot long ago. Using boats and stuff," Shin said.

He had often played in the lake near the city where he lived as a child. Boating, catching fish, bathing in summer, and skating in winter if the ice froze. The lingering smell of fish was indeed disgusting, but this level of swaying was nothing.

Going through the hallway where thin light shone in, the two eventually came out onto the deck.

Under the blazing sunlight, the blue horizon spread out. Shadows of land could be seen in the distance, and gulls sang and danced.

Shin had expected such a scene—but unfortunately, it was foggy all around.

"... This doesn't exactly feel like a grand departure."

Standing by the ship's rail and looking around, Shin muttered gloomily. Only the sound of the ship's hull cutting through the waves echoed.

The water surface couldn't even be seen—that was an exaggeration, but if one stood at the bow, the fog was thick enough that the stern was blurred. Still, perhaps the sunlight that should be in the sky reached them, as the world was dissolved in white.

"There's no need to be so dejected."

The voice and shadow emerged from the fog behind them. It was Father Marsei, who had guided Mei and the others somewhere and then came over here.

"If it weren't for the fog, I would have had to have you stay in the warehouse a while longer until land was out of sight."

What would have happened in that case—Shin grimaced, imagining it.

"I see... when you think about it that way, it certainly means it was a help... Where are they?"

"For now, I've guided them to the restroom in the back. If they lie down in the cabin for a while, they should get used to it soon."

"Thank you."

Rezeld walked up to the Father.

"Once again, we are in your debt, Father Marsei."

While saying this, he quietly handed something he took from his pocket to the Father. It was likely the remainder of the "alms."

The Father also quietly tucked it into his pocket.

"No, no. This too is the guidance of Lord Lufard-Lion. ...Well, it's near the coast in the morning, so there's fog, but it will clear soon. And to tell you the truth, it's convenient for you to be here."

"What do you mean by that?"

Asked by Rezeld, Father Marsei put his hand on the wooden railing at the ship's edge.

"This ship is designed to move using a Law-Breaking Arts engine, just like trains and Arts-powered vehicles. Thanks to that, it can be moved with even a small number of people... but as long as Law-Breaking Arts is mediated by human spiritual power, the output won't go up if there are few people on board. Usually, seven or eight people cross to the northern continent, but with that number, speed just doesn't come out, and it takes five or six days. But if you also ride, the output will go up at least a little, and we might arrive sooner."

"I see." Rezeld chuckled.

In other words, for Father Marsei, they were welcome stowaways who brought not only money but also a surplus of time. No wonder the deal had concluded so smoothly.

Of course, as far as arriving early was concerned, they had no complaints either.

"Oh..."

Father Marsei muttered, suddenly looking toward the bow. Shin and Rezeld also looked that way, led by him, but there wasn't anything particularly unusual—

Marsei turned a smile toward the two.

"It looks like we're about to break through the fog."

Now that he mentioned it, the white filling their path seemed to be thinning. Before long, the blue of the sky and sea increased in intensity—

And soon, the ship emerged from the fog with disappointing ease.

There.

Azure and blue as far as the eye could see. Beyond the retreating fog, the peaks of mountains showed their continuity.

—Sindred Kaylam left the Hume continent where he was born and raised on this day.

"You certainly seem to like the sea."

That night, at dinner. Father Marsei, as was his wont, spoke to Shin with a smile.

A small diner inside the ship. Meals were taken in shifts, and currently, there were only the five of them: the four in Shin's group and Father Marsei. Shin and the others had

taken off the robes they were given and were now back in their usual clothes.

"...Not particularly."

Shin muttered bluntly while eating bacon and potato soup. He wasn't being shy or avoiding conversation; he really just didn't think much of it—

"For saying that, you seemed to be staring at nothing but the sea all day," Rezeld interjected from the side.

Certainly, Shin had been staring at the sea almost all day after breaking through the fog in the morning.

"Because I don't get tired of looking at it."

For him, it was simply that. Under the sky, the horizon continued endlessly. It looked like the same scenery, but in reality, the waves and the sky showed different faces from moment to moment. He found that interesting, so he had been watching the scenery the whole time.

"I got tired of it immediately," said Mei, who was sitting to Shin's right.

After sleeping in the cabin until past noon, she seemed to have recovered somehow. However, perhaps she wasn't fully recovered, as she wasn't eating much.

Come to think of it, near evening today. Mei had come over to Shin while he was watching the sea on the deck, exchanged a few words, watched the sea for a while, and then left immediately... Apparently she had grown tired of it in that short time.

"Well, you're that kind of person."

"Wow, how rude."

"Or rather, how, not tired." Even Laphra Lifra joined in.

"Staring at the sea all day without getting tired means you like it," Rezeld added the final blow, but Shin still tilted his head.

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"Hahaha. Well, certainly, many people seem to be captivated by the charm of the sea. They say the sea sometimes shows wonders," Father Marsei said, watching the group.

"Wonders?"

"There are various legends," Marsei said, as if searching his memory, in response to

Mei, who asked while biting a wooden spoon.

"For example, stories of half-human, half-fish. Or unidentified ring-shaped creatures that cross the sea to the far distance. Stories of encountering ships that went missing decades ago, or stories of floating islands that only appear in a rainy sea. But those can't be dismissed as mere legends across the board. In fact, there are examples where Moon-Drop Fish, which were thought to be just legends in the past, actually existed."

"Heeey."

Shin and the others raised their voices in admiration.

"What kind of stories, what kind of stories?"

To Mei, who asked with great interest, Marsei replied with a gaze like a father looking at his daughter:

"Let's see... then, a story of a half-human, half-fish that I heard. One night when five moons lined up in the sky, a fisherman supposedly went out for torchlight fishing. Torchlight fishing is—"

Interrupting his narration:

Knock knock.

"Father Marsei."

The knock, the sound of the door opening, and the call were almost simultaneous. Opening the door without waiting for a response, another Father stood there. He looked familiar, but Shin and the others hadn't been formally introduced.

"What is it?"

Marsei stood up and walked over, and the other Father whispered in his ear.

"—That is... Let us go."

Saying this, Marsei started to leave the room with the other Father—

Then, as if suddenly remembering, he stopped at the doorway and turned back toward Shin and the others.

"—Would you like to come along? You can see something rare."

—? —

The four looked at each other—then, without anyone saying so, they stood up and followed Marsei and the other. Soon, the group went out onto the deck and were left

speechless.

The sea was bright.

A world divided by the horizon. There were already four moons in the cloudless sky. However, the light in the sea was not just the reflection of the moons and stars.

It was shining.

Deep parts of the sea.

The brilliance was far down at the bottom, and yet, it was approaching.

Huge. Tremendously so.

"...What... is that...?"

Shin whispered. He didn't know the depth it was at—but at least, it was likely much more gargantuan than this ship. That much, he could tell.

"—I've heard of this—"

Rezeld whispered in daze. No one noticed that the ship's speed was dropping.

"But—something like this—"

The light passed under the ship—

"...Ah. It's floating up."

At Mei's nonchalant mutter, everyone else remained frozen, clutching the ship's railing.

He had forgotten even that.

Whether out of awe or ecstasy.

Light.

It welled up onto the water's surface.

From directly beneath the ship they were riding.

"……This is it……!"

Marsei whispered.

From the depths of the pitch-black sea toward the surface, countless small undulations of light came surging forth.

As for what it actually was—even Shin could tell at this distance.

Countless, glowing magic crests.

"The Moon-Drop Fish……"

The Father's voice carried a faint tremor.

Shin had at least heard stories of it.

A collective entity of glowing crests that conquered the sea. Having no physical substance, it didn't even leave a wake. Seen from afar, its form resembled a giant, streamlined, shining fish; hence the name, Moon-Drop Fish.

But to call it a "fish" might be an understatement of its monumental existence.

Its true nature was unclear. Some said the core was actually a tiny, tiny fish that traveled the ocean while creating a miniature world around itself with crests. Others said it was the distortions held within Crosscadia itself erupting outward as magic crests.

All that was known for sure was that it was, for the most part, harmless.

The group stood there, simply staring into that torrent of light.

However—they did not notice.

Within that pitch-black sea, a massive body of light had been born.

And their ship, resting atop it, appeared from above as a single, unnatural black dot.

"The Moon-Drop Fish—"

"I've heard the rumors, but this is the first time I've seen it."

A conversation that was little more than a whisper was exchanged in the heights of the night.

Five pairs of wings blended into the darkness; they likely couldn't be seen from the sea's surface.

These were the Devas who had come pursuing Mei.

To tell the truth—they had already grasped their target's movements several days ago.

They had briefly lost sight of them during the train ambush, but it wasn't long before they realized all the targets had vanished.

Sezenol, transformed into a Hume, began gathering information in the villages and

towns within walking distance of the ambush site. Eventually, he heard word of a group that matched their description.

It took a few days—but once they knew that much, it was easy for the winged Devas to close the distance they had once lost.

That being said.

By the time they were in a position to catch up, the targets had already entered a large Hume city.

Making a move there could hardly be called a wise strategy.

The Devas were down one member, leaving five. If the targets had collaborators who stayed out of sight, they were five or more.

In terms of numbers, they were equal or less. Furthermore, the location was inside a Hume city. Just like the city Sezenol had struck before, there was a risk of tanks and other complicated weaponry appearing.

Even if they tried to aim for an assassination by transforming into Humes, there was a high possibility the targets possessed the ability to see through the transformation.

Thus, the plan they devised was an attack at sea.

On the ocean, there was no need for a fair fight. They only needed to sink the ship. Afterward, if they painstakingly crushed anyone who poked their head above the surface, the matter would be settled for sure.

However—an uncalculated situation occurred.

On the day of the Hume city's festival, they lost sight of their targets.

It was due to monitoring from a distance, and above all, the fact that the festival crowds far exceeded their expectations.

They knew Humes were numerous compared to Devas, but they hadn't expected them to swarm in such numbers just for some festival.

By this morning, they realized the targets hadn't returned to the inn and searched by land and sea, but had no luck.

—If the opponent is using a ship, just look for one heading north. From the sky, finding a single ship on an empty sea shouldn't be much trouble.

That was what they had assumed.

But in practice, the sparkling waves reflected the sun and dazzled their eyes.

In the end, all they knew was that there were no signs of movement by land.

Assuming it must be by sea after all, they flew around randomly until the sun set—and just as they were halfway to giving up, *it* arrived.

A giant, glowing streamline in the sea. The mysterious entity known as the Moon-Drop Fish.

It was the commander, Soldima, who discovered the black dot within a corner of that radiating light.

A single medium-sized ship. That was the identity of the black dot.

It wasn't a fishing boat. If so, there was a high probability the targets were aboard.

"Shall the attack be at midnight?"

"—I suppose so—"

Questioned by Sezenol, Soldima pondered for a moment.

If the targets were completely asleep, it would certainly be a safe and sure way to finish them.

But there was no guarantee the targets were truly on that ship.

If the targets showed themselves during a battle, that would be fine.

But conversely, if they didn't show their faces, it would be impossible to judge whether they had sunk along with the ship while sleeping, or if they hadn't been on board at all.

It would be best if they could confirm the targets' presence now, but if they drew that close, their own presence would naturally be detected.

In that case—

Looking around at Sezenol and his subordinates, he spoke.

"Let us strike now."

Everyone nodded.

"We will approach from mid-air. The benchmark is the same height as the target ship. Flying too low risks blocking the light of the Moon-Drop Fish, and flying too high risks blocking the moon or stars, which could lead to early detection.

……Not that I think they have any decisive countermeasure even if we are discovered,

but it is best not to give them even a chance to counterattack.

Once we are close enough and I give the signal, disperse. Surround the ship and begin the attack.

Two warnings. First, do not get too close. I assume you don't want a repeat of the train ambush?"

They had lost one of their kin there. There was no need to wait for an answer.

"The other thing. Ultimately, we will sink the ship, but before that, we need to confirm the targets' presence. Do not overdo it from the start. First, use threats and light attacks. Any questions?"

"What if we cannot confirm the targets?"

To the raised question, Soldima replied matter-of-factly,

"If they don't show themselves even after being cornered, the probability that they aren't on board increases. That said, as long as there's a possibility they are hiding, we have no obligation to let them go. We will sink the ship immediately and search for the next one. Anything else?"

This time, no one spoke.

Soldima gave a small nod.

"Then, the operation begins now."

He declared, striking the air with his wings.

The five shadows glided through the night toward the silhouette of the ship floating in the light—

A voice was heard..

Shin stood by the ship's rail, staring at the thing called the Moon-Drop Fish. Mei was to his left, also looking at the water's surface—

What reached his ears was Mei's voice.

When he looked, Mei was staring intently at the welling light, whispering something small. In her blue eyes, the light reflected and flowed by.

Something was wrong. Well, Mei was always "wrong" to begin with, but compared to that, this was still strange.

"Hey."

He tried calling out, but there was no response.

"Hey, Mei."

Even calling her name resulted in the same. The welling light illuminated the girl's face from below, making it look somewhat eerie.

Just as he was about to call a third time, Mei moved.

Without changing her gaze, she slowly raised only her left hand—

G-g-guuuun!

Along the extension of her outstretched hand. Fire that had suddenly flown from the dark sea shattered into orange spray before it could reach the ship.

"Wh—!?"

"What was that?"

The Fathers raised their voices. They hurriedly looked around—and froze.

If they were looking for them, they were easy to find even in the night.

Not far off on the sea. Surrounding the ship, shadows were floating in the air.

Because it was night, they couldn't make out the details, but—

"……De…… Deva……!?"

Father Marsei whispered in consternation.

It seemed word of the incident in the southern city—Burgess—had reached their ears as well.

Someone let out a scream. Using that as the trigger.

"……Eh? Oh?"

With a small shiver, Mei let out a breath. Returning to her senses, she looked around blankly.

"Could this be…… bad?"

"Of course it is!" Shin yelled.

"……I was prepared for this…… but they've come, haven't they……"

Rezeld's whispering voice also held a note of bitterness.

Shin and Rezeld had expected this. If there were to be another attack by the Devas, it would likely be on the sea. But even if they could predict it, they had no way to counter it.

It had already been proven during the train incident that Shin and Laphra Lifra would be useless in this kind of situation. They had wanted to procure attack and defense magic rings somehow—but naturally, such things weren't easily found.

The best they could do was a feint like this, going from a different harbor than the one with the regular ferry service, but……

"—Found you—"

The voice of a Deva who had spotted Mei carried across the night sea.

Instantly.

Wooooosh!

Along with their war cry, attack-type Law-Breaking Arts was unleashed all at once toward the ship!

Rezeld deployed a shield of Law-Breaking Arts and managed to stop one shot. But it was ultimately a drop in the bucket. The rest struck either the deck or the hull, scattering fire and destruction.

The ship shook violently at the impact.

"Whoa!?"

Mei stumbled a few steps, pulled a magic ring from her clothes, and hurriedly slipped it onto her left wrist.

……?……

Seeing that, a doubt suddenly occurred to Shin.

When she had deflected the Deva's fireball just now, Mei hadn't been wearing a magic ring. Usually, Mei shouldn't be able to do such a thing without a ring……

But now was not the time to be brooding. The second and third waves of Deva attacks struck the ship in rapid succession.

It seemed they weren't aiming for Mei directly yet; they intended to sink the ship first. Rezeld and Mei were trying to defend as best they could, but with five against two, they

simply couldn't keep up.

"What is this, what does this mean!?"

On the swaying ship, Father Marsei lunged toward Shin, who was nearby. He seemed to be on the verge of panic; his tone was different from usual.

Well, he seemed to have enough reason left not to do something stupid like grabbing Rezeld and dragging him down.

Naturally, Shin had neither the leisure nor the obligation to explain in detail.

"I don't know! But for now, doing something is the priority! Don't you have any weapons!"

"As if! This is a friendship mission ship!"

The answer he got was perfectly logical.

"Then just bring something that can substitute for a weapon! Even a knife for eating will do at this point!"

"O-okay!"

Leaving those words, Marsei headed inside the ship. He looked like he might actually take Shin's words literally and bring back dinner knives—

The situation, of course, did not wait for Marsei.

CRUNCH! The ship shook violently—

"Agh!"

A small groan echoed.

From the previous jolt, Mei had slipped her feet and struck her body against the ship's railing, half-leaning out over the side.

Laphra Lifra pulled the hem of her clothes from the side and managed to hold her back just as she was about to fall—

But the Deva in front of Mei did not miss that moment.

Switching the aim of the attack-type Law-Breaking Arts intended for the hull toward Mei, he unleashed it.

Mei noticed and tried to regain her posture, grabbing the railing—and her hand slipped on the water.

It was all—a matter of a second.

What on earth was he thinking?

Without even being clear himself.

Before he knew it, Shin had rushed to Mei's side—and swiped at the incoming Law-Breaking Arts with his right hand.

A strange sound occurred.

An impact on his arm.

Unable to kill the momentum of his rush, half of his body went over the railing.

As he twisted his body, he could see Mei and Laphra Lifra. They were looking at him with faces of extreme shock. Their expressions were so exaggerated he almost wanted to laugh.

From his right elbow down, he had no sensation, as if it were numb.

His vision tilted.

He knew he was falling toward the sea.

He could see Mei.

While screaming something, she broke free from Laphra Lifra's hand and leaned out from the railing—

An impact.

And the lukewarm sea water robbed Shin of his vision and consciousness.

For a moment, silence fell over the battlefield.

However.

"Continue. Sink the ship."

The commander, Soldima, gave the order calmly.

The Hume swordsman had protected the target—it was beyond sane—and struck down an attack-type Law-Breaking Arts with his bare hand.

And naturally.

The blow had pulverized the Hume's right arm, scattering blood, flesh, and bone

fragments into the night sky.

The Hume who had lost a hand fell into the sea just like that—

Surprisingly, the target dove into the sea as if chasing after him.

It would be more certain to sink the ship they should rely on before dealing with the target who fell into the sea. Soldima made that judgment and gave the order.

The Devas' Law-Breaking Arts struck the hull again and again. But for some reason, the destructive power of the Law-Breaking Arts hadn't increased for a while.

It wasn't just Soldima. The other four were apparently the same.

A blow that should have opened a giant hole in the hull could only pierce a hole the size of a child's fist, and although the ship had begun to list, it was still stubbornly afloat.

—Though, perhaps that was only a matter of time.

The attack continued without rest.

Sea water—

And the torrent of glowing magic crests that comprised the Moon-Drop Fish enveloped her body.

She remembered.

Various things.

As if peeling off thin layers of skin, one by one.

How could she have forgotten such simple things? —No, she knew the reason clearly.

Returning. Her consciousness. Her memories. Her body. To her original form.

But now was not the time to be immersed in sentiment. In any case, settling the matter in front of her came first.

There was a need to hurry, but there was no need to rush, nor to fear.

Because cause and effect, every Law, was now within these arms.

Right beside her was Shindred, who had lost his consciousness and his right arm.

Just by being conscious of it, breathable air appeared around her and Shin.

Selecting and configuring several crests from within those that made up the

"Moon-Drop Fish." Decomposing and reconstructing the sea water at a molecular or atomic level, fabricating the optimal proteins and minerals, and setting to work on the regeneration of Shin's arm.

……The surface of the sea was terribly noisy.

Apparently, the Devas were stubbornly continuing their attack on the ship.

It would be a hassle if they lost their means of transport for later.

"Mei" looked at the Devas.

The massive body of the Moon-Drop Fish surged violently.

Abruptly.

Sezenol felt an unspeakable anxiety.

There was no reason. No basis. Just an anxiety that bordered on terror.

Reflexively, he spread his wings—

The next moment.

It happened.

The surface of the sea raised its head.

Slowly, all at once. Again and again. Like snakes. Like tentacles.

Before the Devas could even understand what was happening.

The snakes of sea water turned into spears of sea water and struck out at them!

Hurriedly flapping his wings, Sezenol retreated at full speed. Several snakes, now turned into spears, pursued him. The spears were faster.

—What is this—!

Screaming in his heart, he spat out magic incantations and deployed a shield of Law-Breaking Arts. A shield of light-scales generated in the void. Beyond that, within his field of vision, he saw a fellow Deva being pierced by a water spear.

One of the water spears easily pierced and shattered the shield of light he had created.

Retreating further and creating more shields. His mane stood on end.

Out of terror.

—What is this—!

Another Deva tried to destroy the water spear with attack-type Law-Breaking Arts, but either they couldn't destroy it, or the spear regenerated. They failed and their body was pierced.

—What on earth is this—!

While generating shields of Law-Breaking Arts in a chain. While flying backward with all his might. Sezenol screamed in his heart.

In the corner of his vision, he saw Soldima's lapis-lazuli armor falling toward the sea.

Wiped out? This many Devas? In an instant?

Once, in a Hume city. He had lost two subordinates. At the end of a battle.

But that was due to various factors overlapping. It was impossible that a Deva was weak.

And yet now—

Four were struck down in an instant.

The one who did it was—probably that target. Sezenol had that intuition.

But what kind of being could pull off such a feat? This was as if—

A water spear shattered the Law-Breaking Arts shield and approached Sezenol. He poured strength into his wings but—it was not in time.

THUD!

With a dull impact.

The sea water spear pierced him.

"What…… is this……"

On the listing ship.

Laphra Lifra whispered in a hoarse voice.

Following after the fallen Shin, Mei had leaped into the sea. Just as Laphra Lifra was searching the water surface from the ship to catch sight of her—

It happened.

The sea water extended like whips or tentacles and instantly struck down the Devas.

A few of the water snakes still remained on the sea, writhing and squirming, but they showed no sign of attacking the ship.

"……I don't know."

Even Rezeld could only answer that way.

Likely, this was something Mei had done.

Previously, he had seen Mei's right arm change for a moment and manipulate powerful Law-Breaking Arts. But this time, it even surpassed the power from then.

Overwhelming the Devas—no, a power that didn't even care for them.

This was as if—

Clatter clatter clink!

At the sudden sound of metal, Rezeld reflexively turned that way.

There was Father Marsei, who had come out of the ship's cabin. For some reason, countless forks and knives for eating were scattered at his feet.

"—Oh—"

His eyes were fixed on the things extending from the sea.

He knelt just like that, clasped both hands, looked up at the moon while trembling, and whispered words of prayer.

Apparently, things above were settled.

The regeneration of Shin's arm was also nearly finished.

Taking a breath, a devil suddenly whispered in "Mei's" mind.

—How about remodeling his right hand now as a 'Subordinate Three Power-Up Plan'?
—

Engraving magic rings. Or rather, making it look like scissors or tentacles. Something cool like that.

For a moment, she seriously considered it—but no matter how she thought about it, she would likely be scolded to death.

While she was seriously agonizing over various things.

"……Ugh……"

Shin let out a small groan.

"Mei's" heart gave a *thump*.

She panicked. Like a child whose mischief had been discovered.

Shin would regain consciousness soon. And he would see her form. There was no reason to be ashamed of this form, but it was certain that Shin would be surprised.

Surprised—and how would he react?

If he just gave his usual half-hearted retort, well, fine. But what if he was terrified? What if he found her repulsive?

There was no need to care. There shouldn't be. She had chosen to be a villain, and it shouldn't matter if she was disliked by the not-very-useful Subordinate Three—it shouldn't. And yet—

"Ugh……"

Shin groaned again, and his eyelids trembled slightly. "Mei" hurriedly flapped both hands pointlessly.

She knew that staying as she was would be overwhelmingly advantageous. She knew it, but—

Shin's fingertips trembled slightly—

—Oh, for goodness' sake!

"Mei" reconfigured the crests of the "Moon-Drop Fish" and began the "operation."

The water snakes suddenly collapsed.

Those that had raised their heads lost their form in the void and rained down into the sea as saltwater rain.

"……Does this mean…… it's over……?"

To Rezeld's whisper, there was no one who could return an answer.

"—Mei!?"

Returning to her senses, Laphra Lifra hurriedly peered down from the ship's railing.

At that moment.

SPLASH!

Directly ahead, something massive jumped out of the sea.

—!? —

Laphra Lifra looked reflexively.

Not just one. Three, four, five…… and more appeared around the ship. Along with them, the surrounding air grew cold.

"……Icebergs?"

Rezeld whispered in daze.

Yes. Those were chunks of ice with overwhelming mass. They floated up one after another as if surrounding the listing ship.

Naturally, at this time of year, there were no icebergs in a place like this. There was no way ice could form in this warmth.

Someone—or something—had frozen the sea water to create icebergs.

"—Over there—!"

The one who first noticed was Father Marsei. When Rezeld and Laphra Lifra turned their gaze at his word—

On top of the first iceberg that had floated up, there was the figure of Shin lying down.

It was unusually cold.

Thinking that, he slowly opened his eyes.

What he saw were the night sky, the moon, and the stars.

What on earth had happened? Just as he was trying to remember—

At any rate, his back was terribly cold, so Shin sat up with a *crackle*.

"……Huh?"

And he became even more confused.

Why was he on top of ice?

If he remembered correctly—the Deva attacked Mei—and he jumped in to cover her…… he remembered that much.

When he looked, the ship was listing at a distance, there were no signs of Devas around, and he was soaking wet. The right sleeve of the jacket he was wearing was torn off halfway for some reason.

"……"

He somehow stared intently at his right hand, opening and closing it. There was nothing unusual about it, but for some reason, there was a faint sense of discomfort.

It was full of things he didn't understand.

For the time being, he peeled off his wet pants which had started to stick to the ice with a *crackle*—

—Come to think of it—

Suddenly remembering, he turned his gaze toward the ship. Rezeld and Laphra Lifra standing by the railing and looking this way. Father Marsei kneeling and offering a prayer.

But Mei was not there.

The image he saw just before losing consciousness was Mei trying to jump into the sea after him.

He hurriedly looked around—

SPLASH!

Another block of ice floated up right nearby. A magnificent spray of water rose—and for a second, Shin felt as if he saw something behind it.

Before long, the spray turned into rain hitting the ice and the water surface—

"……It's…… quite cold……"

After it settled, standing on the ice was—Mei, soaking wet but the same as usual.

Just now, he thought he had seen her as something else……

"Yo."

"Yo."

To Shin's greeting that couldn't even be called a greeting, Mei also raised one hand with a *pop* and returned the greeting.

"……What's the meaning of this? This?"

Without expecting a proper answer, he asked anyway, and the girl puffed out her chest proudly.

"I did it."

"……This ice?"

"Yeah."

She nodded somewhat arrogantly.

Before they knew it, ice had completely covered the area, as if connecting the group of floating icebergs and the ship. Beneath it, the Moon-Drop Fish continued to well up its still-glowing magic crests.

It was as if the Moon-Drop Fish itself had become a giant ice ship.

Even the high part of the icebergs was only slightly higher than the edge of the listing ship, but ice is much larger below the surface than what is above.

When you think of it that way, just how much water had she turned into ice—

"—What happened to the Devas?"

Suddenly remembering, Shin hurriedly looked around. But no such shadows could be seen anywhere.

"Beat them up too," Mei said as if it were nothing.

"You?"

"Yeah."

"Hooh."

"Wow, you don't believe me."

"No, it's not exactly that, but……"

He trailed off and scratched his cheek.

Shin remembered Mei's abnormal power that he had seen before. If the same thing happened again, he felt it might turn out like this.

……Well, looking at Mei's face, he didn't feel any sense of reality at all.

As if remembering, he shivered.

"Anyway…… let's get back to the ship."

"Yeah. It's cold."

The two jumped down onto the ice connecting the icebergs and the ship and walked toward the ship, being careful not to slip.

Shin, who used to play on ice in the lake, was relatively fine, but Mei looked like she might slip and fall at any moment if she let her guard down.

The wind that should have been warm was rapidly dropping in temperature because of the icebergs. Their breath was gradually turning white—honestly, wearing wet clothes was quite painful.

If he asked Rezeld or Laphra Lifra, who were still dazed on the ship, about various circumstances, he would likely understand a bit more. First, back to the ship to change clothes. Talk after that.

"So…… do you remember how you did it?"

"No, not at all."

Even though he had asked without expectation, the answer was as predicted. It had been the same last time. When he asked how she did it, she said she didn't know, she forgot, she couldn't remember.

"Anyway, first, clothes—"

Mid-sentence—Shin noticed it.

A coldness different from the chill of the ice. A fishiness different from the raw smell of the tide.

How should he call it? It was something that could only be described as a presence or a scent.

Instantly, Shin shoved Mei aside.

Wind pierced through, grazing his back.

While sliding on the ice along with Mei, Shin thrust his right hand into the inner pocket of his jacket. A hard sensation at his fingertips. Perhaps it was good that he had attached it firmly this time; fortunately, the Law-Breaking Arts Sword was there.

He gripped it, and as he pulled it out, he turned around. He almost lost his balance on the slippery footing, but somehow managed to regain it.

……He never thought his old ice-playing would be useful in such a way.

Behind him, a wet *thud*. Mei had likely fallen, but he couldn't afford to turn back and check.

Directly in front—was a Deva.

A golden mane and two horns. Shin recognized that form.

It was the sole survivor among the three Devas who had once struck in Burgess City, aiming for Mei's life.

That Deva was now—injured.

Blood flowed from his left shoulder, and his left wing hung limp and powerless. Something had pierced his shoulder and snapped the wing.

—If he were to believe Mei's words, she was the one who had done it.

Despite having sustained a by no means shallow wound and breathing heavily, the Deva's eyes still held the light of fighting spirit, and his whole body emitted the scent of hostility.

The wind Shin had felt on his back just now must have been an attack-type Law-Breaking Arts released by that Deva. He could feel the back of the jacket he was wearing had been torn.

Shin realized. There was no room for conversation or negotiation—and no time for hesitation.

The moment he realized, Shin kicked the ice and headed toward the Deva, half-sliding on his shoe soles!

Gripping both ends of the Law-Breaking Arts Sword with both hands and tracing the engraved spiral bands with his fingertips, he whispered the keyword to activate the blades.

—Align the height of Varta and the height of Terror to the spiral, and become a blade of light to annihilate the Deva—

A vibration like a whisper was born deep inside the metal cylinders he held. Shin pulled the cylinders apart from the middle just like that.

A metal cylinder gripped in each hand. In each, a short but radiant blade of light that

pushed back the darkness had appeared.

Fight.

That was the only option left for Sezenol.

Although he had avoided a fatal wound at the last second, his wing was too damaged to flap.

Land was far, and his comrades were no more.

If he hid on the sea, he might be saved for now, but what awaited him was a slow death.

Just as he thought he had at least sunk the enemy's ship, icebergs appeared in the area and fixed the listing ship with ice.

They likely intended to use the massive block of ice itself as a substitute for a ship.

In other words, if he stayed still like this, it would be a pointless death without exception.

There was the path of surrender. To admit defeat and beg for his life to the one who had defeated his comrades. Perhaps his life alone might be spared—

Don't be ridiculous.

Then there was only one path remaining.

To fight and, if possible, defeat the target. Even if that couldn't be achieved, at least one of the hangers-on……

Naturally, if he struck, he likely wouldn't return alive. What awaited might be a mere dog's death.

But even so, it would be better than drowning like a dog as things were.

He crawled onto the iceberg from an inconspicuous place and hid in a spot not visible from the ship.

Eventually, the target and the Hume swordsman came into view.

—? —

Sezenol frowned for a moment. The Hume's right hand, which should have been blown off by the Law-Breaking Arts, was properly there.

Was he mistaken in thinking it had been blown off? Or…… no. Now was not the time for

such thoughts.

Watching the target and the Hume walk by, while hiding his killing intent—

……Hyuuuu-ooooooooh……

He wove a magic incantation that sounded like the wind. It wasn't a Law-Breaking Arts with much destructive power, but it had enough power to finish an opponent by taking them by surprise.

He unleashed it toward the target!

But at that moment.

The Hume swordsman moved. Slamming into the target, they both dodged the blow together.

Was he read? Not the swordsman, but the slight killing intent directed at the target?

Regardless of the reason, it was a fact that it had been dodged. The Hume swordsman turned toward him, kicked the ice, and drew out daggers of light.

In the corner of his vision, he saw a Dragno and a Rewarder descend from the listing ship onto the ice.

It seemed the time left for him was not very much.

Then—

Sezenol glared straight at the Hume swordsman.

The Deva howled.

A glowing magic ring appeared in the void, clearly visible even to Shin's eyes. As it was unleashed.

"Protect yourself! Mei!"

Shouting this, Shin leaned his body back as if recoiling and slid on the ice with the soles of his shoes.

If Shin dodged the Deva's Law-Breaking Arts, the blow would head behind him—toward Mei. But she should be able to protect herself. He acted on that belief.

The destructive power grazed the tip of his nose as he leaned back.

Sliding, he closed the distance in one breath, aiming to sweep the Deva’s legs as they

passed.

But just before he could, the Deva drew a pair of short swords while simultaneously kicking the ice, leaping away from Shin with a roar.

—What kind of Law-Breaking Arts is coming!?

Shin braced himself, but no obvious attack followed. Instead, a shroud of white, glowing magic bands entwined around the two blades in the Deva's hands.

Shin hit the ice on his backside, coming to a jarring halt.

In the corner of his vision, he saw Rezeld and Laphra Lifra descending from the ship onto the ice.

Rezeld unleashed Law-Breaking Arts toward the Deva. Having lost the strength to flap his wings, the Deva should have been unable to brake suddenly on the slippery ice.

However, The Deva thrust the short sword in his left hand deep into the ice beneath his feet. It was as if he were driving a stake into mud.

The ice instantly turned to steam.

It seemed the previous Arts had been used to imbue the blades with intense heat.

Using that as a pivot, he performed an emergency stop. Rezeld's shot merely grazed the space in front of the Deva.

The Deva kicked the ice again. His destination was, of course—Mei.

Mei could defend against most forms of Arts. But what about a sword attack?

Mei was trying to flee, but she would clumsily try to stand, lose her balance, and fall, only to try again—repeating the cycle over and over.

Laphra Lifra couldn't even stand properly on the ice. Rezeld, perhaps lacking confidence in his mobility here, provided covering fire with Arts, but due to the distance or the unstable footing—or both—it served as little more than a distraction.

The Deva's stride was far from steady, yet he was closing in on Mei with agonizing certainty.

Distance was on the Deva's side.

Shin kicked the ice, lunging toward the Deva's back. Clenching one of the Arts swords in his teeth, he ripped off his jacket from the torn section on the back and shed it.

If he chased normally, he probably wouldn't make it in time. He would catch up to the

Deva only *after* a blade had been plunged into Mei.

In that case.

Rezeld fired another burst of Arts at the Deva. But his aim was off. The shot cut through empty air without the Deva even needing to dodge.

The Deva was almost upon Mei.

Shin—

Threw his jacket.

Sezenol felt a presence and glanced over his shoulder—then scoffed.

The Hume swordsman. With one glowing dagger in his hand and another held crosswise in his mouth, he was throwing a torn piece of cloth.

What a pathetic attack.

By all appearances, it was a harmless rag. What did he hope to achieve by throwing that?

Was it desperation? Or was he hoping Sezenol would overthink it, dodge, and lose his stance?

There was no special trick to the cloth itself. There hadn't been time for that.

Making that call, Sezenol continued his advance without concern.

He felt something wet wrap around his right leg.

Naturally, he ignored it and stepped forward—

Thud. His foot was suddenly snagged, sending him stumbling forward and crashing onto the ice.

"……Wh—!?"

With a voice of shock, Sezenol looked at his leg.

A wet piece of cloth was half-wrapped and half-unraveled around his foot. The unraveled end was frozen fast to the ice.

—So that was it—

Sezenol cursed his own carelessness.

He realized now that the ambient temperature had dropped drastically—enough for wet fabric to stick to the ice instantly.

The Hume had aimed for this. No, even if he had dodged, if Sezenol had lost his balance in doing so, the Hume would have likely thrown a glowing dagger then.

In other words, it didn't matter to the Hume swordsman which happened.

He had underestimated him.

The Hume approached, half-sliding across the ice, glowing blades in both hands.

Sezenol turned his eyes toward him—

Wham.

Flames erupted against Sezenol's back.

The moment he recoiled and exhaled the air from his lungs.

As they passed each other.

The glowing blade in the Hume's hand swept across his abdomen.

There was no impact—

Instead, a heat greater than the fire that had just scorched his back bloomed in his stomach.

Gritting his teeth, he looked over his shoulder to see the target lying flat on the ice in an unnatural posture, thrusting her right hand toward him. On her wrist was an attack-type magic ring.

She had unleashed the fire Arts the moment Sezenol's attention was diverted to the Hume on the opposite side.

The Hume swordsman stood by the target.

The pain in his sliced abdomen was beginning to spread, throbbing and raw.

The power and time remaining to him were scant.

If so, for the end—

He might as well try one last act of defiance.

Clawing at the air, Sezenol roared.

A glowing magic sphere appeared before the Deva's eyes.

Only Rezeld understood what it was. It was the same Law-Breaking Arts that had once sliced through a train car.

To prevent its activation, he unleashed Arts at the Deva. But the opponent made no move to dodge; the blow shattered his shoulder.

Blood sprayed red against the white ice.

Simultaneously.

The magic sphere unraveled, becoming several magic bands that crawled and raced across the ice.

The next moment.

Crack.

With the Deva at the center, the iceberg—snapped.

On the ice that had begun to collapse, Mei and Shin lost their balance.

At that sight, the corners of the Deva's mouth twisted into a smile—and he fell along with the crumbling ice.

Into the sea.

The chunk where Shin and Mei stood tilted slowly—

Rezeld hurriedly constructed an Art. Responding to a magic incantation that sounded like a whistle, a band of light emerged from the tip of his right hand.

The band of light extended like a living thing, bent at a nearly right angle mid-way, and dived through the crack in the ice into the sea—

Shin and Mei. The tilting of the ice block they were on stopped.

The moment Rezeld's magic band struck the sea's surface, it forcibly halted the molecular motion of the water to create ice, bonding the severed section back together.

The battle—was over.

Rezeld searched the air for any scent, but there was no longer any sign of a Deva nearby.

"……Are you all right?"

He called out to Shin and the others.

"……Sorry. Give us a hand."

Kneeling on the tilted ice, Shin's voice was trembling.

"What's wrong!?"

"……My clothes are stuck to the ice…… It's freezing."

Beside Shin, Mei remained stuck to the ice, shivering silently and uncontrollably.

A-choo.

Back on the ship, having changed clothes and wrapped herself in blankets, finally feeling a bit settled.

Mei let out a small sneeze.

In the small dining area inside the ship, only the five of them—Shin's group and Father Marsei—were present.

However, beyond the door, the other Fathers were blatantly eavesdropping, not even bothering to hide their presence.

Marsei silently handed the four of them wooden bowls filled with hot corn potage.

The four thanked him and took a sip, breathing a sigh of relief—

"By the way…… Shindred—your right hand…… what happened to it?"

Rezeld asked tentatively.

"What do you mean, 'what'—"

Shin held up his right hand, looking at both sides of it.

"Nothing's happened to it."

"I'm asking because *nothing* has happened to it."

"I don't get what you're saying."

"I mean: when you shielded Mei and struck away the Deva's Arts—"

"Oh, that."

Rezeld hesitated for a second—and then Mei, while sipping her soup, chimed in.

"I fixed it."

"……"

"As expected of Mei."

She said it so casually that Rezeld fell into silence, while Laphra Lifra was honestly impressed.

"What? Fixed it? What are you talking about?"

Shin, the only one confused, asked.

Laphra Lifra turned her head.

"Sindred, your right hand, it came off."

"It doesn't just 'come off'!"

"It was off."

To Shin, who dismissed it as her usual nonsensical joking, Rezeld added with a serious face.

"To be precise, it was hit by the Deva's Arts and completely destroyed."

"Hah!?"

Shin frowned theatrically.

"You must have seen wrong. First of all, if that were true, why is my hand perfectly fine right here?"

"Like I said, I fixed it."

"Listen here."

As he lightly patted the top of Mei's head with that very right hand—

There's no way you could—

The words he was about to say froze in the back of his throat.

Come to think of it.

Previously, Mei had instantaneously healed a deep wound she herself had received from a Deva.

If she could heal her own wounds, she might be able to heal someone else's. That

thought suddenly took hold of him.

"……Is that true?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"I don't really remember."

"……I see……"

"Where's my thank you?"

He looked for a moment at Mei, who was directing an expectant gaze toward him—

"Do you have any intention of thanking me for the food money I spent when we were living in the city?"

"No, not at all. ……Oh."

"Then that's that."

Shin said, sipping his soup—

"If your conversation is finished, I have something I would like to ask as well—"

The voice of the inquiring Marsei was mixed with equal parts anger and fear.

"So? What exactly is the meaning of all this?"

"What do you mean?"

Rezeld feigned ignorance.

"I mean—! ……I had a vague suspicion that you were likely a Dragno. You're clearly not a Hume, and I've heard that among high-level Arts, there are those that can change one's appearance. Plus, you were heading for the Northern Continent. I have no intention of criticizing who you are. I don't particularly care to know the identities of the others, either. However…… it is a fact that a swarm of Devas attacked you. What is going on?"

Rezeld took a sip of his cup's contents.

Perhaps interpreting this attitude as being ignored, Father Marsei raised his voice.

"The Moon-Drop Fish! Devas! Mysterious water snakes and icebergs! And even now, beneath the ice encasing this ship, the Moon-Drop Fish is clinging to us and heading rapidly north! What is happening!? What is going to happen to us!? Surely we deserve at

least that much of an explanation!"

"—My name is—"

Rezeld began.

"Rezeld Gynos Rezizanor. As you suspected, I am of the Dragno."

"That name is……"

"You should know."

Cutting off Marsei, he continued.

"As someone chosen for the friendship mission. You know that we Dragno take pride in our own scales and wings, and that our middle names represent the color of those scales and wings."

"I know that much…… Gynos?"

A look of confusion crossed Marsei's face.

"Does that have some special meaning?"

"It's the name of the Dragno ruling class."

Shin had meant to ask Rezeld, but it was Marsei who answered.

"To be precise, it means 'Golden Scales and Golden Wings.'"

Rezeld gave a wry smile.

"Unlike Humes, we Dragno do not have a hereditary system. The combination of scale and wing color corresponds clearly to an individual's characteristics…… and it's not rare for the colors of parents and children to be completely different. Because of that, the role of coordinators for towns and political officials naturally falls to those with the middle name of Gynos—Gold-Scale, Gold-Wing. Based on the premise that I would head in that direction in the future, I used transformation Arts to take this form and went to study in the Southern Continent—in a Hume city—to broaden my horizons."

"So, your future is basically decided from the moment you're born? That seems…… convenient but also restrictive……"

At Shin's honest whisper, Rezeld didn't take offense, laughing as he said:

"Any society has its conveniences and restrictions. The same goes for the hereditary system often seen in Hume society. Besides, for us, it's not that things *must* be a certain

way, but rather that our general aptitudes are clear. ……But I'm getting off-track……"

He turned back to Marsei.

"I want you to recognize that what I am about to tell you is the truth, staked upon the name and pride of 'Gold-Scale, Gold-Wing.' ……As you say, we are indeed being targeted by the Devas. However, we truly do not know the reason why. At any rate, in the Northern Continent, the Devas shouldn't be able to interfere carelessly. That is why we are heading there. I apologize for keeping it from you."

"It's not a matter of 'apologizing'! If that was the case, you should have said so from the start……"

"And if I had, you wouldn't have let us on the ship—right?"

"……! ……A-anyway, for now……"

Marsei started to say something but then fell into a disgruntled silence.

He likely wanted to say they should turn back to the port and get off. But currently, that was a request that couldn't be fulfilled. This ship was originally designed to be powered by Arts, pushing through the water with a screw at the hull. But now, the screw and all were encased in ice, and their course was at the whim of the clinging Moon-Drop Fish.

Naturally, even if Marsei asked the Moon-Drop Fish to turn around, it wasn't going to listen.

"But…… it's not like all four of you are being targeted, right? Who is the Devas' true target……"

"I cannot tell you that."

Rezeld said, cutting off the Father.

"If I were to say it, it might cause you, or one of the people outside the door, to harbor feelings unsuitable for a member of the clergy."

"……"

To the silent Marsei, Rezeld smiled.

"In any case, you need us on this ship. Over time, the ice will melt bit by bit, and when that happens, this ship—with holes in it—will sink. Therefore, until the ship is repaired or we reach land, we must use Arts to maintain the ice. I can do that, but is there anyone else here who can?"

"....."

The reply was a silence of negation.

"—Regarding the Moon-Drop Fish and various other things, I don't understand them either..... but regardless, I guarantee there will be no more attacks from the Devas."

".....I certainly hope so....."

Father Marsei's tone was heavily laced with sarcasm.

The moon is visible in the sky.

The five moons that circle this land, Crosscadia.

Sezenol realized.

That he was still alive.

That he wouldn't last much longer.

He no longer felt the cold or the heat. Not even pain.

However—where was this? Why was he looking up at the sky?

"Pull yourself together."

Called out to, he moved only his eyes to shift his gaze. There was a familiar Deva face.

".....Commander."

He whispered with a thin breath.

Commander Soldima. The Deva clad in lapis-lazuli armor.

Filling the heavens was a vast field of stars. The two of them were riding a small chunk of ice, floating in the dark sea. The ice and the Moon-Drop Fish carrying the targets were already far away.

"You're..... alive....."

"When we were attacked by that thing—" Soldima said.

"I judged that I couldn't dodge it, so I folded my wings and fell into the sea. It was a gamble—but it didn't pursue me into the water."

".....I see....."

Amidst a consciousness that was on the verge of fading into haze, Sezenol whispered.

"……What…… are we being made to fight……?"

He had heard the rumors of the Moon-Drop Fish. But—he had never seen or heard of a phenomenon like that.

Then that—wasn't done by the Moon-Drop Fish. It was done by the target who had fallen into it.

—We Devas are the most superior beings. Lizards, monkeys, and beasts are of no consequence—

To a greater or lesser degree, all Devas held that mindset.

Certainly, Devas are strong. But they are by no means invincible. Sezenol knew that. Because in the Hume city, he had been defeated by those very lizards, monkeys, and beasts.

But that thing—far surpassed any of them. One who normally acted like a Hume girl, yet wielded overwhelming power.

"……I do not know," Soldima's voice sounded distant.

"All I can do is imagine. Because there is nothing like that among what we know. It is sacrilegious, and I don't know for a fact, but I wonder if even our King possesses such power……

—Fifty years ago—

What our King began…… was the disappearance of the royal castle…… was done…… target…… same……"

Listening to Soldima's voice as it gradually grew more distant.

Sezenol's consciousness sank into a deep, deep place—

Between the sky and the sea.

Soldima let out a soft, small sigh and concluded his hypothesis.

"If that is the case—it is only natural our King would fear it—"

He knew the words wouldn't reach the now-immobile Sezenol. No. It was because he knew they wouldn't that he could say them.

In the sky, there was a round moon.

The sun rises, and the sun sets.

All that can be seen are the sea and the sky.

……And ice.

The ship carrying Shin and the others—or rather, the Moon-Drop Fish carrying the iceberg—continued to head north across the sea.

Three days since the Deva attack. The voyage was, for the most part, going smoothly, one might say.

That said, it wasn't as if problems had disappeared.

For now, it seemed certain they were heading north, but they didn't know whereabouts on the Northern Continent they were heading, or when they would reach their destination.

Naturally, there was a Father with navigator skills on this ship, but he had been bedridden from the shock of the Deva attack. Because of that, it wasn't clear exactly where the ship was now.

Furthermore, because of the ice covering the area, it was persistently cold. However, as Rezeld had said, if the ice melted, the ship would take on water. Out of necessity, Rezeld maintained the ice with Arts daily, while the Fathers worked on repairing the ship in the meantime.

……Well, one couldn't have high expectations for how well amateurs could restore a ship this battered without proper materials or tools.

Shin offered to help with the repairs, but he was bluntly rejected.

The Fathers' stress and their resentment toward Shin's group could also be considered a problem.

They didn't know when they would reach the Northern Continent. Would the water and food last until then? No, for that matter, was it true there would be no more Deva attacks? If this state continued for a few more days, that stress might eventually erupt somewhere.

However.

"Whoa-oh."

Slip-thud.

Oblivious to such problems, Mei, the person at the center of it all, was carefree, playing on the ice.

Bundled up in layers of borrowed robes and blankets, looking like a fluffy ball, she would climb down from the ship's rail onto the ice. Whatever she was trying to do, she would walk, slip, and fall; walk, slip, and fall.

Laphra Lifra would hurriedly rush over to help her up.

"Whoa-oh."

Slip-thud.

The two of them would fall over together.

At first, Shin had been the one to retort, telling them not to play around so carelessly, but when he was asked what else they should be doing, he fell silent—and now he was just watching the two of them from the ship's rail.

It was also a fact that since they were being rejected by the Fathers with annoyed looks whenever they tried to help, there was nothing to do.

The Fathers didn't stop Rezeld from repairing and maintaining the ice with Arts, but that was only because there was no one else who could do it.

Well, humans are beings such that once they take a dislike to someone, everything they do starts to look disagreeable.

If Shin's group offered to help, it was "Why now?" If they were playing, they would be looked at as "Why are they playing?" And if they stayed still, the Fathers would likely think "What are they just staring for?"

If everything they did left a bad impression, perhaps it wasn't so bad to just give up and play without a care.

Watching Mei and Laphra Lifra was also—in its own way—heart-warming. Like watching close sisters.

—As long as he's just watching, Shin won't come to any harm.

Mei stood up on the ice with wobbly legs again, walked five or six steps, slipped, and fell, laughing and frolicking as if it were the most fun thing in the world.

—Looking at her like this, she really just looks like a child—and one with a fairly low mental age at that.

But she is not ordinary.

When the Devas attacked, Shin had lost consciousness partway through, but according to what he heard from Rezeld later, Mei had jumped into the sea as if chasing after Shin—

And then, the water's surface changed, and she reportedly wiped out most of the Devas in an instant.

Furthermore, she herself claimed to have regenerated Shin's right arm, which had been blown off by the Deva's attack.

What exactly is she?

Once, for a moment, her left arm had transformed into a monstrous limb covered in white fur. At the moment Mei came up from the sea, Shin felt like he saw her as something else.

—Something—

But what on earth could it be? Something that possessed the power to bury multiple Devas in an instant.

That would be as if—

Shin shook off the foolish thought that flashed through his mind. There was no way such a thing could exist.

But what if.

While watching the frolicking girl, Shin thought.

If he were to learn her true form—would he still be able to interact with Mei in the same way?

Eventually, with her knees bent in a timid posture, Mei nonetheless managed to slide-walk five or six steps. She turned toward Shin, showing her white teeth in a proud grin, and laughed.

"See? I can slide quite a bit—"

Slip-thud.

What is she doing?

Apparently, that thought showed on his face.

"Ah! You laughed!"

Standing back up, Mei pointed at Shin in accusation.

"Yeah. I laughed."

"Wow, how honest. And just when I thought I could slide a bit on the ice……"

"—Everyone!"

At that moment. Abruptly.

Rezeld's voice rang out across the ice.

He had been walking around on the ice as usual, performing maintenance work with Arts—

He was now standing on an iceberg ahead in their direction of travel, his borrowed green robe fluttering in the wind. Without turning around, his gaze fixed on the distance—

"—It's land!"

Silence fell—

The first to move was Shin.

He jumped down from the ship's rail onto the ice and, without losing much balance, began to move across the ice in a half-slide.

Behind him, a series of rather loud *thuds* and *splats* rang out. The Fathers, who had come running at the voices of Mei, Laphra Lifra, and Rezeld, were likely slipping and falling all over the place.

Ignoring them, Shin reached Rezeld's side first and scrambled up the iceberg from a suitable spot.

Once, all that could be seen from there was the sky, the sea, and the boundary between them.

But now.

Where Rezeld and Shin's gazes were directed, at the end of the sea that shimmered and wavered in the sun, lay a shadow shrouded in indigo haze.

"That is—the land where I was born—"

Rezeld's voice permeated the sea breeze—

"Thank you for everything."

Rezeld's words of thanks were met only with Father Marsei's curt:

"—Yeah."

By afternoon, the iceberg had run aground, wedging itself into a beach on the Northern Continent, and there it stopped.

Before they knew it, the Moon-Drop Fish had vanished.

A road ran near the shore. The location seemed to be a place familiar to both Rezeld and the Fathers.

However, their paths were apparently in opposite directions—

In the end, everyone carried what was necessary off the ship, and they parted ways there.

"……We ended up causing them quite some trouble, didn't we?"

While walking along one direction of the road.

Rezeld glanced over his shoulder at the Fathers behind them.

"Can't be helped. Devas are the bad ones," Laphra Lifra said.

Well, it was a logical argument, but if emotions could be settled by logic, the world would be a much more peaceful place.

"—Even so, it's a bit of a surprise, isn't it?"

Walking alongside Rezeld, Shin, who had been wearing a bit of a furrow in his brow for a while now, whispered thoughtfully.

"What is?"

Asked by Rezeld, Shin kept his gaze directed slightly downward as he said:

"No. I mean, that there's such a proper road in the Northern Continent."

Rezeld stumbled a few steps, then looked at Shin with a frown.

"……Wait…… um, Sindred? What exactly did you think our country was? We have roads. We're a civilized nation."

"Ah. No, I didn't mean to insult you. Just, you Dragno normally have wings and can fly,

right? So I figured you wouldn't really need roads."

Rezeld gave a sigh.

"……There is a thing in this world called the distribution of goods. For example, there's no such thing as a Dragno who can fly through the sky while carrying a cartload of wheat."

"……I see. That makes sense."

As Shin nodded in understanding, Rezeld asked tentatively:

"Um…… I want to ask, just in case…… what kind of image do you Humes have…… of how we Dragno live……?"

"What kind? Well…… I've heard various things from you, so I thought I knew a little bit……"

Shin trailed off.

Although ethnic friendship policies have started to be taken up recently, there are still various misunderstandings in terms of culture and customs.

In truth, much of the image Humes hold regarding the Dragno was rooted in a book titled *Dragno Records*, published by a certain adventurer before the war, which spread through the world in a flash.

It claimed: Roads are unnecessary for those with wings; for a Hume to go to their towns, they must push through dense jungles. Eventually, beyond the greenery, a dazzling shimmer is seen. That is the town of the Dragno.

Crystals formed into shapes with magical meaning are lined up in a row, surrounding the entire town as a barrier. They believe it protects the town from calamity.

The houses contain countless treasures of gold and silver, and the residents are all peaceful and wealthy.

However, because they share the blood of reptiles, they cannot move in the morning until they have sunbathed for a while.

Tails grow back even if cut off. Newborn children have webbing on their hands. And so on.

Naturally, it was all lies.

Apparently, the self-proclaimed adventurer who authored this book had never actually been to the Northern Continent. This was discovered through recent research, but once

an image has taken root, it is difficult to wipe away, and many still believe such nonsense.

In fact, even for Shin, if Rezeld hadn't transferred into the training school he attended, there would likely have been many things he would have continued to misunderstand. Deceived by appearances and names, that the Dragno are, in fact, full-fledged mammals—

I might have remained without ever knowing even that much.

Or rather, until this very moment, I had simply believed the "there are no roads" part.

From Rezeld's perspective, he had no reason to go out of his way to say something as obvious to him as "my country has roads."

I have no idea what other strange misunderstandings I might have. For now, I decided to play it cool and feign ignorance.

"Well, it's mostly... normal, then.

—More importantly, now that I think about it, we've technically entered this country without permission... isn't that bad?"

"Well, it's not like there are any particular penalties," Rezeld said nonchalantly.

The reason was simple.

Four continents, four countries. And a different race for each.

In this situation, there was no eccentric soul who would go through the trouble of smuggling themselves into another country.

To be honest, you couldn't survive if you secretly crossed over to another continent.

Cases of Deva or Dragno criminals fleeing to the Hume country were extremely rare, but in those instances, what the Humes needed wasn't laws, but an army.

—Nowadays, with cultural exchange beginning, laws regarding entry and exit and checkpoint systems will likely be established eventually—but at the very least, as of now, there are no clear regulations.

"Are you sure? I'd hate to be suddenly surrounded the moment we reach a town..."

"Don't worry about it," Rezeld replied with a laugh to Shin's joking question.

"...Still, though..."

Muttering aimlessly, Shin looked around at his surroundings.

The road drew a gentle curve to the right, stretching out between the coast on the left and the trees covering the right side. Its destination was not yet visible.

A road. There was no mistaking it for one, but looking closely, many things were different from the city Shin was from—or rather, the roads that ran through Hume towns.

Was it earth, or something else? The road was paved with something grey, and there were absolutely no pebbles or weeds on top of it.

The plants and trees growing by the roadside had leaf shapes he had never seen before, and the chirping of birds or insects coming from all over was also unfamiliar.

It felt as if even the scent of the tide and the smell of the soil and greenery were somehow different.

"Is something wrong?"

Hearing Shin's mutter, Rezeld asked with a hint of unease. He probably wondered if there was another strange misunderstanding.

"Oh, no. I was just thinking that the grass and trees are quite different after all.

—Come to think of it, Laphra Lifra, is the Eastern Continent where you live also quite different?"

When asked, Laphra Lifra, who was walking behind Shin and the others while holding Mei's hand, gave a small nod.

"Different."

.....

The sea breeze crossed the road.

The leaves of the trees swayed in the wind—

No matter how long Shin waited, the next words did not come from Laphra Lifra's mouth.

"—Hey, look. If it's different, I'm looking for an answer as to *how* specifically it's different.

I mean, try to put some effort into expanding the conversation."

"Specifically?"

Prompted by Shin, Laphra Lifra frowned and thought for a moment.

"Everything."

"No, wait."

"The smell. The colors. The scenery. The air. Everything.

Words... can't fully explain."

"Well, there truly are things that are different between seeing and hearing about them," Rezeld said with a wry smile next to Shin.

"Even though I heard many things before I went to the Southern Continent as a student, there were many times when it was different once I actually saw it.

I had heard talk of carriages and magic-powered vehicles and trains, but I couldn't even imagine what shape each of them took.

Just as Humes have misunderstandings about us, we also have misunderstandings about Humes."

"Huh. Like what, for example?"

"That since Humes can't fly, all the buildings are one-story. Or that since Humes are overwhelmingly more numerous than other races, the towns are packed tight with them. Even when sleeping, lots of people pack into a room and sleep standing up."

"No way."

Shin chuckled.

"But well, I guess that makes sense when you think about it.

In that case, it might be more interesting to just see what the towns here are like all of a sudden without asking too much."

"Then I'll refrain from saying too much about appearances as well. I think we'll reach a town around evening, so look forward to it."

"—Actually, I'm more looking forward to finally being able to take it easy," Mei said from behind.

"Delicious food, a bath, a fluffy bed..."

"As for those—well, it depends on the negotiations."

"Then I'll help with the negotiations too."

"Laphra Lifra too."

"You guys stay out of it."

Food, a bath, and a place to sleep.

With anticipation, everyone's pace became a bit lighter.

At first, Shin didn't realize what it was.

"It's come into view."

Rezeld's voice rang out just as the world began to be dyed in the colors of the sunset.

Told this, he looked ahead, but all he could see was a row of trees.

"...The town?"

"Well, compared to Humes, our population is overwhelmingly small, so even if we call it a town, it's only about the size of a village over there."

It wasn't a matter of scale; he couldn't even find anything resembling human dwellings...

"Ah!"

It was Mei behind him who let out a cry of surprise.

"It's true! There it is!"

"Where?"

"Straight ahead, a little to the right!"

"...I'm asking you, where?"

"I can't see it."

Laphra Lifra also didn't seem to see it.

Even as they spoke, they should have been getting closer, but—

"...Hm?"

Shin inadvertently let out a sound and squinted.

There was a sense of incongruity in the trees ahead—exactly in the area Mei had

mentioned.

It was as if the atmosphere was just a bit different there—

Straining his eyes, he saw something of the same color amidst the rows of green and brown.

Looking closely, there were many, many of them.

"Is that it!?"

"Yes."

"Right."

"Which one?"

Laphra Lifra apparently still hadn't noticed.

And then.

In the twilight, lights were suddenly lit.

One.

Two... three. Four, five, six.

They were likely the lights of Law-Breaking Arts. What were illuminated were several nearly cylindrical buildings.

Several amber-colored translucent pillars stood in rows, with green walls connecting them. Shin couldn't tell exactly what they were made of.

There were things resembling windows here and there, and the buildings were all two stories or higher, with dome-shaped roofs featuring large skylights.

Perhaps they served as both streetlights and household lighting; small lights were lit at the entrance and on the roof of each house.

That was the appearance of a Dragno town.

Thinking of the location, they should have been able to see this area even from the ship before reaching land... but it seemed they hadn't noticed because the town was camouflaged with the trees.

"Ah! That's it!"

"**Too slow!**"

Laphra Lifra finally cried out, and everyone else harmonized. The town was already right before their eyes.

The row of trees broke slightly, and from the coastal road, a paved branch road continued inward. Buildings lined up their roofs facing it.

Rezeld headed toward it without hesitation.

Before long, the group spotted figures at the edge of the town.

—Whether "human figures" is accurate, I don't know, but in any case, they mostly shared the human form.

They had hair, eyes, eyebrows, ears, a nose, a mouth, two arms, and two legs. That much was the same as a Hume.

However, a pair of horns extended backward from the sides of their heads, and there were large wings on their backs. Behind their loose trousers was a third leg. From there, a long tail hung down, the tip of it covered in something like leather.

On their slightly large hands were rather large, sharp claws. The skin visible from their clothes had scales. Yet, their faces were much closer to Humes than Shin had imagined.

This was—the true form of the Dragno.

But. To be honest—

Rezeld would likely be offended if he said it—but Shin found that their appearance somehow left an impression similar to the Devas.

"Excuse me."

Rezeld called out, and the Dragno turned around. His scales were white, and his hair and wings were green. In the Dragno way of speaking, he would be "White-Scale, Green-Wing."

He looked toward them and, for a moment, wore an intensely human expression of surprise, but—

"—And you are?"

Perhaps realizing immediately that Rezeld was not a Hume, he asked in a calm tone.

Rezeld, placing his right hand on his left flank, said:

"I take this form for certain reasons, but as you may have guessed, I am one who shares the blood of the Scale King. My name is Rezeld Gynos Rezizanor. I have a matter to

discuss with the Dragon Leader of this town. If you would be so kind, could you announce us?"

"The Dragon Leader...

—Understood."

The White-Scale, Green-Wing Dragno also pressed his right hand to his left flank and covered his right arm with his right wing as he spoke. Apparently, this was their way of greeting.

"It's just there, so I'll guide you. For now, will you follow me?"

Saying this, he turned on his heel and began to walk.

Guided by him, they walked through the town while being subjected to the curious gazes of other Dragnos.

Shin looked around as much as he could without being rude.

Naturally, there were women, children, and the elderly in the town. Just as with Humes, he was slightly surprised to see that the women had breasts, even though he had known.

Given that they had wings on their backs and tails at their rears, it was natural that their clothing designs were different. Loose clothing resembling tunics caught his eye. There were no skirt-like garments; men and women all wore trousers. And everyone, again, had the tips of their tails covered with covers made of leather or cloth.

Seeing one person walking while dragging their tail, Shin finally understood that it was, so to speak, something like a shoe.

Along the way, there was a small general store, selling things quite normally. Though the buildings were different, it was just like a normal Hume shop.

—If they can fly, I'd like to see them pull off a trick like opening a shop in mid-air—

Shin thought that for a second—and chuckled to himself.

The implanted images seemed to still be strong. The mid-air market that just crossed his mind was surely a story from that phony record. When you think about it, there's no point in going to the trouble of carrying heavy luggage into the air to sell it.

They hadn't walked all that far when the White-Scale, Green-Wing Dragno stopped in front of a certain house.

"Is this it?"

"Yes."

The Dragno who guided them nodded to Shin, who had inadvertently let the words slip.

"Dragon Leader," Rezeld had called him, so Shin had imagined he was something like a mayor or city manager.

But for that—the house was not particularly impressive.

It wasn't that it was shabby. It was exactly the same as the other houses.

If he were to go back to the entrance of the town right now, close his eyes, and spin around three times, Shin would no longer be able to distinguish which one was the house of this Dragon Leader.

...Well, come to think of it, there's no rule that says someone in a position of responsibility shouldn't live in a normal house.

"I will announce you, so could you wait here for a moment?"

"Please do."

After waiting for Rezeld's reply, the White-Scale, Green-Wing Dragno opened the front door of the house on his own and went in. Whether generous or careless, the door wasn't even locked.

Before long, he reappeared and said:

"He will see you. Please. Well, I shall take my leave now."

"Thank you."

With Rezeld's thanks at his back, the Dragno who guided them walked off briskly. For someone kind, he was strangely business-like... well, it would be a problem for Shin's group if he were to talk for a long time out of curiosity.

But Rezeld didn't mind and went in as he was told. Shin and the others followed through the entrance.

It was obvious when you thought about it, but—

The room they entered was round.

It was a large semi-circle, as if a large cylinder had been divided in half from the center.

It looked like it would be difficult to live in, but there was a fan-shaped side table at one

end of the room, and a staircase leading up at the other end... so it seemed there were certain life hacks being employed.

In the middle of the partition wall—at the part that would be the core of the building—there was a fireplace, and centered around it was a fan-shaped carpet, two triangular tables, and an arc-shaped bench without a backrest, forming a concentric layout. This was likely the living area.

Shin suddenly remembered the house from a fairy tale he had seen in a picture book as a child.

And by the fireplace—was a Dragno with silver scales and golden wings.

Clad in loose, robe-like clothing, even to Shin's eyes, he could tell he was quite elderly.

"Please forgive the sudden visit."

Rezeld said with a Dragno-style greeting—or what seemed to be one.

"My name is Rezeld Gynos Rezizanor. I take this form now for certain reasons. I have come to ask for your assistance if possible."

"I am Muarad Zeagynos Mactosort."

The Dragon Leader introduced himself in an aged voice along with the greeting gesture, and pointed to the bench with his wing.

"For now, let us hear your story. Please, sit."

Prompting them, he sat down first.

It was only then that Shin understood the reason why the chair had no backrest.

If you have a tail and wings, a backrest gets in the way.

After waiting for everyone to sit down.

Rezeld's long story began—

A bird was singing somewhere.

Trying to stretch his awakening body—

Thump!

"Ow!"

Hitting his head against the wall. Finally, Shin remembered.

That this was the country of the Dragno.

—Last night.

The Dragon Leader Muarad, after hearing Rezeld's story, had promised them transport to the capital, contact with the center, and a place to stay for the night.

Dinner was full of ingredients he had never seen before, and Shin couldn't tell if it was luxurious or not, but it was delicious and suited his taste well enough. The bathtub in the bath he took before sleeping was incredibly large, allowing him to relax comfortably.

Thinking about it, the Dragno have wings and tails, so the tub would be large for that reason.

However, as for the sleeping arrangements—

The bed was, well, a normal wide bed. They apparently mostly sleep facedown on it, but that was fine.

The problem was simply a matter of space.

Four people had suddenly descended upon a not-so-large private house where the Dragon Leader Muarad lived with his family, which was not an inn or anything of the sort.

Since there weren't many spare beds or sleeping spaces, for the time being, Mei and Laphra Lifra were squeezed into one room, while Shin and Rezeld were in separate rooms. With blankets and sheets on the floor, a comfortable sleep was honestly impossible.

Well, as someone who had suddenly barged in and was being cared for, he wasn't in a position to complain.

Looking out the window, the rows of greenery were shining in the morning sun.

It was a beautiful day.

Changing from the borrowed robe-like pajamas into his clothes, he left the room.

Going to the living room, everyone was already awake.

Recognizing the figure of Dragon Leader Muarad among them—

"Good morning."

When Shin gave the greeting, Mei's eyes went wide.

"Whoa, despite being Minion Three, you're giving a greeting like a decent human being!"

"Unlike you, I have at least a minimum of manners and common sense."

"Even though you don't use them."

"Shut up."

Brushing it off lightly, he sat in an empty seat.

On the triangular table, breakfast was already served. Sliced bread, something like scrambled eggs, and something resembling salad were piled on large plates, with a small plate and a cup of tea for each person.

Waiting for Shin to sit, Muarad smiled slightly and said:

"Good morning. Now, now that everyone is here... shall we have breakfast?"

"Agreed~ trying it out~"

Mei was the first to speak up, reaching for the bread, salad, and scrambled eggs.

Taking that as a signal, the others also began their meal as they pleased.

The bread had a slightly herb-like scent, and the scrambled eggs were just like scrambled eggs with shrimp. The salad centered on a vegetable similar to lettuce, with unfamiliar vegetables mixed in from time to time. The tea was just like fermented tea with plenty of milk.

Muarad's family was also here, but they were not visible now. Perhaps they were having breakfast in the dining area.

Well, since it's a normal private house to begin with, there doesn't seem to be a room where many people can eat at once.

"—Oh, right. About the transport to the capital that I mentioned last night—"

After slowly, slowly finishing just one slice of bread topped with salad, Muarad turned toward Rezeld.

"It's a bit of a sudden story, but... I heard that before noon, some people from the town are going as far as Tyucke by *Ga-Sha*. If you like, why don't you ride along with them? I will arrange it if you wish. Once you get to Tyucke, you'll be able to find proper transport to the capital."

"Is that all right?"

"Of course."

Saying this, Muarad nodded with a smile.

Shin could mostly guess what the conversation was about.

The "Ga-Sha" or whatever the two were talking about was a means of transport—that is, a vehicle like a carriage or a magic-powered car—and "Tyucke" was likely the name of a large town nearby.

He was curious about what kind of vehicle a Ga-Sha was, but well, it seemed he would be able to see it soon enough.

"Well then—"

Muarad finished his tea and stood up.

"I shall go and talk to them. When you have finished your meal, please prepare your luggage. I apologize for rushing you."

"Thank you for everything."

Sent off by Rezeld's words, Muarad left the house.

Shin and the others quickly cleared breakfast, packed their few belongings, and gathered in the living room again, where Muarad had already returned.

They were to depart as soon as the four arrived.

After a hurried farewell to the Muarad family, they headed to a house at the edge of the town.

This place also had a structure similar to the other houses. Again, Shin felt like he wouldn't be able to tell it apart.

"I've been waiting. Please, go to the back."

The Green-Scale, Green-Wing Dragno who was waiting at the entrance, after exchanging the usual greetings, said this and pointed with his wing to the thing nearby.

"....."

Shin could feel himself furrowing his brow.

The thing the Dragno pointed at was—how should I put it—by all appearances, it was

just a box.

The size of a slightly large bed, just the cargo bed part of a wagon. Two things that could only be described as wooden boxes like that were connected in a line on the road.

No wheels, no horses, just boxes.

If you climbed in, you'd feel like you were playing train as a child.

But the Green-Scale, Green-Wing Dragno hurried into the front box, and Rezeld also stepped over the edge of the back box—

"—What's wrong, everyone? Come on, please."

"...Oh... yeah."

Prompted, Shin also obediently climbed into the box and sat down next to Rezeld. There was only hay spread on the bottom, and nothing like chairs. It really was just a box.

"But will this move?"

Mei's suspicious voice from where she sat behind.

"Normally, it wouldn't move."

Laphra Lifra even chimed in.

"Oh. It's everyone's first time with a Ga-Sha, isn't it?"

"Well, I'll show you what it is later. For now, let's depart."

The Green-Scale, Green-Wing Dragno followed Rezeld's words with spirit, holding a pole and waving it in front.

...*Whirr, whirr*...

Was there something like a whistle at the end of it? Every time the tip of the pole cut through the wind, a unique melody rang out.

Suddenly.

The box the group was in rose slightly with a sway.

With a sound, it began to run across the earth.

A driving sound like hard objects clashing against each other. It certainly sounded like *clatter-clatter*. This was likely simply the origin of its name.

The speed was about that of a normal carriage. The connected boxes carrying the group

left the town and reached a road leading through the forest—

"…….What…….! **What the hell is this!?**"

It was only then that Shin, coming to his senses, let out a cry of surprise.

"Wha… what's wrong, Shindred, all of a sudden?"

"'What's wrong' is my line! What is this!?"

Saying this, he looked at the box beneath his feet.

Rezeld said with a wry smile:

"That's why I said, the one under this cargo bed is the Ga-Sha."

"It's… 'under'?"

Shin's voice cracked.

"Did you just say it's 'under'!?"

"Yes. Because it's a living creature. It has a nature that draws it toward the sound of that wind whistle, so we control it with that."

Rezeld pointed with his eyes to the pole held by the Dragno in the front box.

"Think of it as something like an insect with a flat body about the size of this cargo bed, and countless legs growing underneath."

"……"

Imagining the appearance, Shin, Mei, and Laphra Lifra bit their lower lips.

Unaware of their feelings, the Dragno in the front box said in an intensely cheerful tone:

"Well, I'll show you once we get to the town."

"**No thanks.**"

The voices and hearts of the three became one.

He found it while flying in the sky near the town.

Noticing it, the Green-Scale, White-Wing Dragno landed in the forest.

In the greenery, a woman was crouching alone.

Not a Dragno. A Hume woman.

Come to think of it, he had heard a story that a group including Humes had visited the town where he lived yesterday. In that case, she must be one of them or someone related.

He wasn't sure of a Hume's age, but he could somehow tell she was a woman because she had breasts. She had black hair and was wrapped in a loose tunic-like garment.

"What's wrong?"

When he asked, the woman looked up slightly.

"... ... ..."

"—?"

Her mouth moved slightly, but no voice could be heard. Her shoulders were shaking slightly up and down.

—Is she weakened?

Thinking this, he drew near, crouched down, and leaned his ear in.

The woman's mouth moved again.

What reached his ear was—a high-speed, compressed magic incantation that Humes shouldn't be able to vocalize.

Before the Dragno could pull away.

The attack-type Law-Breaking Arts the woman unleashed had pierced through his heart.

As he slumped, the woman stood up and grabbed his collar with one hand.

The woman propped the Dragno's corpse against a nearby tree and quickly stripped off his clothes.

Standing a short distance away, opening her arms and legs slightly, the woman looked up at the sky and cried out.

...*Ooooh-aaaah*...

Like a cry of pain or a howl, it was a long, long string of magic incantations.

In response, glowing magic bands were born, covering the woman's entire body like a cocoon—

As the voice continued, the cocoon swelled, distorted, and burst—

Leaving behind only the remnants of light and the figure of the female Deva born from within.

The one who had once helped Mei and the others in the Southern Continent.

"...Honestly... that person too... giving me such a troublesome... mission..."

With heavy breaths from her shoulders, the female Deva grumbled.

The transformation Arts she had just used was convenient in various ways, but it wasn't omnipotent. Rapid changes to the body were accompanied by considerable fatigue and pain.

This was the second time today—and she had to do it a third time starting now.

She had followed Mei, whom she was ordered to protect, at a distance and reached this continent.

Up to this point, it was fine—

The problem was from here on.

If she was to continue following Mei, she needed to borrow the form of a Dragno. Otherwise, she would eventually be spotted by someone, and it would become troublesome.

She could transform into a Dragno-like form using only the images in her head. However, that would lead to inaccuracies here and there. Naturally, she would be spotted by real Dragnos.

To transform accurately, she needed a model after all.

The problem was the method of procurement. Explaining the situation honestly—that was out of the question.

In that case, it was reasonable to finish someone off and borrow their form.

So she first transformed her body into a Hume woman based on her memories.

As planned, she let him let his guard down and approach—since she was using him as a model, she couldn't damage his appearance too much. A single strike to the heart with attack-type Arts.

She walked up to the front of the now-immobile Dragno and said:

"I'm borrowing your form."

Saying this, she breathed out a long magic incantation—

The journey was a series of small and large surprises for Shin.

Riding on the Ga-Sha and the like to a relatively large town.

There, Rezeld arranged for a vehicle called a tow carriage, pulled by creatures like headless cows or horses, along with a driver.

The structure wasn't much different from a Hume carriage. A private room with a door, windows, and wheels, and a beast to pull it, along with a driver.

The only difference was whether the thing pulling it was a horse or not.

Riding that, on the way to the capital.

Shin saw various things.

Strange insect-like creatures. Strange bird-like creatures. Strange... well, things that could only be described as strange creature-like things.

On a day when he saw a strange creature in the morning and firmly resolved that he wouldn't be surprised by anything anymore, he would be surprised at noon to see ordinary cows grazing normally in a field.

—However, what was unexpected was that the Dragno's food actually suited Shin's taste quite well. —Regardless of the appearance of the ingredients.

When things like boiled insects were served, and he cracked the shells and ate them with teary eyes, they tasted just like shrimp. When raw meat from a strange soft-bodied creature was served, and he ate it with teary eyes, it was unexpectedly delicious. When something that looked exactly like ordinary stew was served and he ate it, it was so spicy it made his eyes water, yet it was still delicious.

After such a journey continued for about five days—

"—By any chance—is that it?"

"Yes."

Just as the tow carriage the group was in crested a hill. Rezeld nodded at the voice Shin raised.

The earth visible from the window of the tow carriage was just green.

Trees filled the mountains, hills, and fields, and in the center, a row of green town buildings spread out.

Above it, several pairs of wings could be seen gliding.

"Our Dragno capital—Mirald."

The scale was likely about the same as Burgess City where Shin lived.

For a Dragno country with an overwhelmingly smaller population than Humes, it was of an extraordinary scale.

As was the case in every town, the majority of the city was occupied by buildings with amber pillars and green walls like those seen in the first town. Especially around the center of the city, the roofs were gathered in quite a jumble.

But amidst all that. Seen from where Shin and the others were, a bit toward the back of the town, there was an especially prominent, large building.

Reminiscent of a group of spires, it radiated an emerald brilliance in the afternoon sun.

"—By any chance—is that the castle!?"

To Shin, who asked in an excited voice while pointing, Rezeld said:

"Not at all. It's a private home built with Arts by an eccentric rich person who thinks they're an artist. We're troubled by how it spoils the town's aesthetic."

".....Oh. I see."

The finger he had been pointing with went limp.

"It's pretty, though."

"What are you saying!"

To Mei, who had said it casually, Rezeld spoke with an unusually forceful tone:

"The neighbors are troubled by how bright it is!"

They certainly seemed troubled.

But there were no other buildings that looked like a castle or anything of the sort.

As Shin looked around the city, he—

"But if that's the case, then... what was it? The place where those 'Dragon Sages' live, is it also just like a regular house?"

"Hardly. They are, after all, the ones who govern the entire state affairs of the Dragno nation. Living in a common house would cause all sorts of practical inconveniences."

"'The ones'...? Are there several of them? Those Dragon Sages?"

"Yes. There are three Dragon Sages who unite the country. Since they are all Gold-Scale, Gold-Wing—those known as Gynos—the three are referred to as the Three Dragon Sages. Below them sit the assembly and various political organizations, so to speak."

"Three people at the very top? That feels kind of... halfway."

To Shin, it was just a passing thought. But Rezeld straightened his posture.

"Not necessarily. It's essentially a question of balance: the number of people in the supreme decision-making body and how much authority is concentrated there. If one person holds all decision-making power, it becomes a dictatorship; if one person is merely a coordinator and a large number of people hold small amounts of power, there's a possibility that nothing will ever be decided. To begin with, in a society where diverse values coexist, a perfect form of government cannot possibly exist..."

He suddenly began to speak fluently and at length.

—Crap—

It was only then that Shin remembered Rezeld had come abroad as a student specifically to be a candidate for a politician.

"Aaaah, wait, Rezeld! I mean... what I want to know is, which one is the castle, or rather the parliament building, where the Dragon Sages are?"

If left alone, it felt like Rezeld would continue this incomprehensible lecture forever. Watching for an opening, Shin managed to call for a timeout.

Rezeld closed his mouth, blinked once in surprise, and said:

"You'll understand once we arrive. —Now, returning to the subject, if we are to consider which political methodology is closest to the ideal, it seems a possible area of study—"

—He won't sto-o-o-o-p!—

Shin screamed internally. Apparently, bringing up such topics to him was taboo. It was too late now, but he realized it.

"—However, the preferred political form varies depending on differences in ethnic culture, customs, and living standards. For example, while respect for the individual is important, in a situation where the populace lacks even the consciousness to try and

understand the positions of others, forming a society that grants significant individual freedom based on the premise of conscientious behavior would simply result in a clash of egos and selfish—"

Thwack.

Receiving a single chop to the head, Rezeld finally fell silent.

"...What was that for, Mei?"

"The spell was too long. I just... did it."

"A spell...?"

"Laphra Lifra also prefers a different topic."

Told off by two of them, Rezeld's shoulders slumped slightly.

"...I see... You're right. Then, let's talk about something else for now."

At this moment, for the first time in his life, Shin felt grateful to Mei. Rezeld whispered to Shin:

"Well then, Shindred, we shall continue this another day—"

"No, well..."

—*He's going to make me listen to the rest later?*—

For a moment, he thought about flatly refusing, but—

"Is there any yummy food?"

"Laphra Lifra also wants to hear about that."

"I see. If we're talking about specialties, perhaps it would be Solg-yaki? It's a type of grilled meat; you wrap the meat in aromatic herb leaves and let it rest in a cold place overnight—"

The topic had already moved elsewhere. There are a few topics in the world that are generally exciting regardless of the company: ghost stories, gossip, and talk of food.

"Come to think of it, there's a dish over there with a similar cooking method—"

"Whoa, I've never eaten that!"

"Fish. Salt it, roast it over a bonfire. Once cooked, eat it bones and all."

"Hollow out a white melon, put in ingredients and consommé soup, and just steam it

continuously—"

While they grew animated over the food talk, the tow carriage continued on, following the road piercing through the greenery. Time flowed, and as the sun changed its position, the carriage eventually reached the city.

Though they were inside the city, the left and right sides of the paved road were lined with plenty of trees. It looked more like a small thicket than a row of street trees. On that road, tow carriages and Ga-Sha carrying loads passed by, and occasionally wings crossed overhead.

The architectural style of the buildings they passed was fundamentally no different from what they had seen in the first Dragno town. Shin now knew that the large skylight-like structures on the roofs were entrances and exits for aerial use.

However, even with a similar impression, each house had its differences. There were differences in height and width, and some consisted of multiple buildings tied together as if bundled. While the basic rule was amber pillars and green walls, some walls were a deep forest green while others were the color of young leaves; the hues varied subtly from building to building, just as the greens of a lush forest differ slightly from one another.

Gazing at the surrounding scenery, the group repeated various bits of small talk as the carriage moved along—

Eventually, with a small vibration, the vehicle stopped in a place that could only be described as a perfectly ordinary corner of the city.

"Thanks for waiting! We're here."

The driver called out casually. Rezeld paid the fare, and the four of them got out.

"This way."

Saying this, Rezeld started walking toward the entrance of a building that looked like nothing more than a normal house. Is this his family home or something? Thinking this, Shin and the others followed Rezeld through the entrance—

And stopped in their tracks.

It was vast.

It was as if several wings that looked like private houses had been bundled together, and the internal walls had all been knocked out. The floor was covered seamlessly with polished stone, and amber-colored pillars stood here and there. Halfway up the pillars,

lights of Law-Breaking Arts shone brightly even during the day.

On the ceiling covering the overhead space were windows for light and numerous aerial entrances and exits. In that vast space, counters were set up, and Dragnos were coming and going, busy at work.

"Looks like a government office."

"It *is* a government office," Rezeld said in response to Shin's mutter, and headed toward a corner of the counter. For now, Shin and the others followed along in a line. The polished floor reflected their figures dimly.

Rezeld spoke about various things with a Dragno official wearing glasses, wrote and submitted documents, and waited for a while. After being handed some documents and waiting for the word to proceed, he headed toward a door in the back.

Beyond the door was a long corridor. The ceiling was incredibly high, with doors leading somewhere on both sides. There were also doors higher up, and catwalks with low railings ran left and right through the air.

"Whoa, weird hallway."

"It's convenient for us Dragnos," Rezeld said with a laugh at Mei's comment. "If you can fly, you can move vertically as well."

"...But hey, if that's the case, what do we do if we have to go up to the second floor? Setting aside whether we'll have the chance." This time it was Shin who muttered.

"There are stairs in a different location," Rezeld said.

"They exist?"

"Of course they do. Even among us Dragnos, there are small children or elderly people with weak wings... those who cannot fly. In fact, in the private houses and inns we've stopped at so far, there were stairs, weren't there?"

"...I guess you're right... But... it's awfully big here."

"Well, it serves as the parliament building, the living quarters for the Dragon Sages, and the government office. Because it is the place where the Three Dragon Sages reside, it's called the Triple Wing. You saw it when we were coming here, didn't you? The part in the center of the city that looked like a dense cluster of buildings."

"That was it—!?"

Shin remembered the huddle of roofs in the middle of the city. He had thought it was a

densely populated residential area, but to think all of that was a single building.

In fact, it was true that this place was incredibly vast. Even as they walked while talking, the corridor continued on. Eventually, at the end of it, there was a large door. On either side stood two Dragnos in matching outfits—guards or something similar.

Rezeld stopped in front of the guards and held out the documents he was carrying.

"My name is Rezeld Gynos Rezizanor. I would like to request the procedures for an audience with the Dragon Sage, Rakia Gynos Lentitias."

"Hmm. Wait."

One of the guards took the documents, opened the door, and went inside. At that moment, Shin caught a glimpse of what was beyond the door—there was a small room, and then another door immediately after. Apparently, for security, it was a double-door system.

They were left waiting for how long? Time spent just waiting feels long. It was even more so in an atmosphere where someone resembling a guard stood nearby and even small talk felt discouraged. Mei and Laphra Lifra, quickly becoming bored, began whispering about something—

Yet, after a while.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The door in front of them opened again, and the guard who had disappeared reappeared. He gave a Dragno-style salute to Rezeld.

"The Dragon Sage will see you. Please, come inside."

"Ri—right now?"

This seemed to be an exceptional occurrence even for a Dragno, as Rezeld wore a stunned expression. In contrast, the guard said calmly:

"Right now."

.....

Rezeld turned a gaze toward Shin as if seeking an opinion—but of course, Shin, who knew almost nothing about Dragnos, could hardly give an answer.

"Anyway... let's go."

Just as Rezeld urged, the group went through the door, led by the guard. From Shin's

perspective, for a meeting with the representative of a nation, it seemed oddly efficient or perhaps even careless... was it due to the name of Gold-Scale, Gold-Wing that Rezeld held? Or had the frequent communications Rezeld sent on the way here been successful? Or was there some other reason—

Beyond the double doors, another corridor stretched out. But the difference from before was that there were no other doors or side paths to the left or right. It was just a perfectly straight corridor. The sound of footsteps echoed strangely.

This corridor was certainly shorter than the previous one, but at the end, there was another door with guards on both sides. Beyond the double doors was another similar corridor. At the end of that corridor was yet another similar door.

Suddenly, Shin felt as if he were being made to walk an endless road. Surely this repetition of corridors and doors wouldn't go on forever.

The double doors opened—

And that was the destination.

A dark brown carpet with gold embroidery continued from the door. To the left and right, Dragnos with swords stood in a row, taking a motionless stance as if wrapping their bodies in both wings.

Beyond them—on three thrones, sat three Gold-Scale, Gold-Wing Dragnos.

"...Th... Three Gynos...!?"

A gasp of astonishment escaped Rezeld's mouth. Even Shin could understand that this was an abnormal situation.

Rezeld was supposed to have requested a meeting with *one* of the Dragon Sages. He was granted an immediate audience, and upon arrival, the Three Dragon Sages—the top of the nation—were all there to greet them.

All of them were dressed in deep green robes, almost black, decorated with gold and silver thread, and wore identical silver circlets on their heads.

"Lord Rezeld Gynos Rezizanor and the three companions he brought with him have arrived."

At the guide's voice, Rezeld snapped back to his senses and gave a Dragno salute. Shin followed suit with an imitation.

"Let us rejoice in your safe return. The blessing of the scales upon you."

One of the Three Dragon Sages, the one on the middle throne, spoke words of appreciation. Rezeld bowed deeply.

"Child of Gynos, Rezeld Gynos Rezizanor. For certain reasons, I have returned earlier than scheduled. Here are my friends, Shindred Kaylam, Mei, and Laphra Lifra."

His voice trembled slightly, perhaps from tension.

"Yes. We have heard the details," said the Dragon Sage on the right.

"So—is it that red-haired girl?" said the Dragon Sage on the left—referring, of course, to Mei.

"That black-haired man over there is also interesting."

The three Dragon Sages suddenly stood up from their thrones, passed through the bewildered guards, and approached the standing Shin and the others. They scrutinized Mei—and Shin—from all four sides.

"Hmm." "Ooh." "I see." "As I thought." "But this is..." "Mmm."

They began to groan in various ways. At this point, Shin completely lost track of which Dragon Sage was which.

"Mmm..."

One of the Dragon Sages stood in front of Mei and stared into her eyes as if trying to see through something. Eyes met eyes. Silence and tension flowed. And then.

"....."

"....."

Bop.

Unable to bear it any longer, Mei's chop exploded on the Dragon Sage's head.

"Whaaa-!?"

"Dragon Sage!"

"You, how dare you!"

Amidst the crisscrossing screams of the guards, the first one to move was none other than Shin.

Grab! He hugged Mei's head with his left arm and, while grinding his right fist into her head, yelled:

"You! What! The! Hell! Are you doing! A little bit of time and place and discretion and common sense and manners and tact and other people's struggles!"

"Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

Mei flailed her arms and legs. Shin's lecture was mixed with personal grudges under the cover of the chaos, but naturally, no one noticed that.

"It is fine. The lack of manners was on our part."

At that voice, the commotion settled down instantly. It was, of course, the Dragon Sage who had received the chop who spoke. He nodded toward the other two Dragon Sages.

"She is a child." "Indeed." "A child."

Exchanging these words, he turned on his heel and returned to his throne.

"Understood. We shall have a dwelling prepared. All of you, relax there. That is all."

The Dragon Sage in the middle spoke on their behalf. Shin had no idea what exactly they had understood—but regardless, it seemed the talk was over.

Following Rezeld in giving a bow of departure, Shin also bowed—and with that, the audience with the Three Dragon Sages was concluded.

The sandy beach was shining in the morning sun.

In a small town in the west of the Northern Continent, the land where the Scale Kings live. There were several Dragnos on the beach. Though their forms differ from humans, they naturally have lives. There are those who board ships, row out to sea, and catch fish to make a living.

The workers on the beach were not about to head out for a catch. They had gone out to sea before dawn, finished their fishing, and were now returning. They were preparing to transport the fish they had caught to the nearby town.

Someone cutting the tails and necks of the fish to drain the blood. Someone quickly removing the easily spoiled entrails. Someone packing fish into boxes and filling them with ice made by freezing water with Law-Breaking Arts.

By the time the absorbed Dragnos noticed—

Just when had they arrived? They were standing at the edge of the beach.

One was draped in metallic magic circles all over their body—

One had tattoos of magic patterns across their entire body—

One was clad in lapis lazuli armor—

One was dressed in ceremonial robes.

Silence spread. The noise of work vanished, and by the time the sound of waves was all that filled the air, the one in ceremonial robes spoke.

"As we have no means of communication, please forgive our sudden visit. Foreign Minister Brugiolas of the Deva race and his three guards. We have taken wing to request a meeting with the upper echelons of the Scale Kings regarding important matters. If possible, could you arrange for us to be announced to the center?"

The waves echoed—and the small fishing village fell into an uproar.

Shin was in a foul mood.

From the window, the cityscape of Mirald, the Dragno capital, and the forests spreading around it were visible. Given a place to live in a corner of the city, Shin, Mei, and Laphra Lifra had been spending some time there.

It was likely a type of collective housing. It was structured like a bundle of Dragno-style two-story private houses sharing walls. It was cramped for a large family, but more than large enough for one person living alone.

Each person was given one house, and they were also provided with a significant amount of living funds. It was quite generous, but Shin didn't know if this was the Dragno way of hospitality or truly exceptional treatment.

If you say things have become peaceful, they have indeed become peaceful. Surrounded by Dragnos like this, there shouldn't be any Devas casually coming to attack.

However, once you feel that relief, a different anxiety that you had forgotten begins to rear its head. For example—is it okay for me to be in a place like this? What am I going to do from here on? Why did I even follow them all the way to a place like this in the first place?

There was the fact that the journey became interesting halfway through. Or the chaos of the Deva attacks. Or the novelty of the things he saw and heard. Those issues had been temporarily covered up, but they hadn't been solved, nor had they disappeared naturally.

The Three Dragon Sages had taken an interest in Mei and seemed satisfied with

something, but what on earth was it? Even now, a week into this life, there was no answer to that.

If he didn't care about anything and just lazily adapted to the current life, it might actually be easier, but it seemed he couldn't do that. In that case, he had no choice but to wait for Rezeld's return.

Rezeld had come to greet Shin and the others this morning. He said he would undergo a ritual to undo the transformation Arts and return to his original Dragno form. Therefore, this would be the last time they met in this appearance.

And he whispered into Shin's ear:

—I'll try asking about Mei.—

For now, he should wait. He had no choice but to wait. If it turned out to be nothing, he could just nod and say, "Oh, I see," and then think about returning to the city where he was born and raised. Rezeld had said the ritual would take time, but it wouldn't take weeks or months.

Regardless, he should wait. That should solve everything.

But what was it? This anxiety lingering in his chest.

"La-Lifu~"

"It is Laphra Lifra."

Laphra Lifra corrected the energetic call at the entrance with a serious face. For the Spirit-Possessed race, names are important. Shortening them is the height of rudeness and could lead to a duel in some cases, but—with Mei as the opponent, it couldn't be helped.

After all, Mei was Laphra Lifra's destiny. ...Still, she thought it would be nice if Mei could learn a little.

Opening the front door and peeking in with a beaming smile was, of course, Mei.

"Gonna go play at Minion Three's place~"

"Understood."

Responding casually, Laphra Lifra headed to the entrance. She had no particular preparations for going out. At this time, Mei would come to invite Laphra Lifra, they would visit Shindred's house, and they would relax there as much as they wanted

regardless of Shindred's annoyed face—this had become their daily routine lately.

They no longer had to worry about Deva attacks, but it was also true that they had become bored. At first, they had walked around the city, sightseeing and the like, but Mei grew tired of that quickly.

They would go to Shindred's house and, while chatting, if Mei let slip words like "Tea~" or "Cookies or something," Shindred would complain with an intensely annoyed face, yet he would still bring out tea and cookies. In short, Shindred was likely bored as well.

But—leaving the entrance with Mei and heading toward the front door of Shin's house right next door, Laphra Lifra asked herself in her heart:

Things were supposed to have become peaceful for the time being. So why won't the anxiety in my chest go away?

Two figures stood there, shining in gold.

One was one of the Dragon Sages in ceremonial robes.

The other was a young Gold-Scale, Gold-Wing Dragno. His non-human face—however, it certainly held the features of Rezeld.

"As I thought, that form suits you better, Child of Gynos."

"As I thought, this feels right. Having no wings made me feel hopelessly insecure."

Like a child wanting to show off new clothes, Rezeld spun around on the spot. The black clothes with gold embroidery he had been given also suited him well enough.

In a small room in a corner of the Triple Wing. Having regained his original form through a ritual lasting several hours, Rezeld was meeting with one of the Dragon Sages—the one he had originally requested a meeting with, Sage Rakia Gynos Lentitias.

He was, so to speak, Rezeld's guardian. Each of the Three Dragon Sages becomes a guardian for several young Gold-Scale, Gold-Wing men and provides them with various guidance. The purpose, of course, is to foster talent that will become the next generation of Dragon Sages.

Therefore, the fact that Sage Rakia greeted Rezeld's return was not at all unnatural. But when that greeting involved all Three Dragon Sages being present—the story changed significantly.

Their purpose hadn't been to greet Rezeld. Then what was it? He could guess.

"By the way—about Mei..."

Straightening his posture, Rezeld asked.

"Is it indeed related to *that* matter?"

"....."

Sage Rakia remained silent for a while—

"—A few days ago, a messenger from the Devas visited the town of Vist."

Hearing this, tension ran through Rezeld's body.

"They have requested a formal meeting. The ones who came were Foreign Minister Brugiolas and his three guards. There has been no reply yet—but if the Foreign Minister himself has appeared, we won't be able to buy much time."

"...What do you intend to do?"

"The Devas likely won't tell us to kill that girl. —Hand over her person—that's probably about it. Of course, we have no intention of complying, but—"

What meaning was there in the silence that fell there?

"...The reason why we Three Dragon Sages are Three Dragon Sages is one. Even if one person strays from the path, the remaining two will correct it. Therefore, if two say 'yes,' it becomes 'yes.' That is the absolute law—"

"—No way—"

"I ask you frankly."

To Rezeld, who whispered with a premonition in his chest, Sage Rakia asked him head-on.

"What if an order were given to kill that girl? What would you do?"

".....!"

"Of course, just saying so wouldn't convince you. Therefore—"

To the stunned and silent Rezeld, the Dragon Sage spoke.

"Let me tell you. Everything that I know—"

And so, the story began.

Good Child's Afterword

The Gold Story and the Silver Story

Story by: Hajime Kanzaka

Once upon a time, in a certain place, there was a novelist who was always troubled by finding material.

"Oh, the deadline is coming up soon, and I can't think of anything for the afterword."

On that day, too, the novelist was taking a stroll along the Neya River while thinking of ideas. The novelist took out his idea notes and, while holding them, stopped by the river.

Ten minutes passed.

Twenty minutes passed.

A gentle breeze blew.

"Oh, oops."

As the novelist spoke with transparent insincerity, he used that moment to throw the notes into the river with all his might.

"Oh no! Because of the raging gale, my idea notes fell into the river! Now I won't make the deadline! Oh dear, what should I do?"

While the novelist was "troubled" in a flat tone, a beautiful woman with long gold hair and blue clothes came out of the river. She held gold notes in her right hand and silver notes in her left.

The woman said to the surprised novelist:

"I am the spirit of this Neya River."

"Wow, that sounds tough. What with the dioxins and all."

The novelist accidentally cracked a joke out of spinal reflex.

"Don't you go making dreamless jokes at a spirit, you!"

The spirit glared at him and fired back with an incredibly menacing tone. When the novelist looked closely, the spirit's hair wasn't naturally blonde but bleached, but he was scared, so he decided not to mention it.

While the novelist was shaking with fear, the spirit smiled sweetly and kindly.

"Is what you dropped just now these gold notes with incomprehensible period drama

ideas written on them, or these silver notes with nonsensical spirit consultation ideas written on them?"

But the novelist shook his head and said:

"No, what I dropped were ordinary ideas written on ordinary paper."

Hearing that, the spirit smiled once more.

"You are honest. To someone like you, I shall give both these gold and silver ideas."

"I don't want them."

Saying it without a pause or hesitation, the novelist began to walk away briskly.

"Wait right there, you little ××××! I go to all the trouble of being kind enough to share some interesting ideas for just a measly fifty thousand, and that's the attitude you give me!? Are you listening, ○○○○○!"

Behind him, the spirit was shouting incredible slang, but it no longer reached the novelist's ears. The spirit wanted to chase the novelist, but since both her feet were set in concrete, she couldn't get out of the Neya River.

The afterword doesn't seem like it will make the deadline, and the editor is probably going to be angry, but even so, the novelist wore a bright, clear smile on his face.

The End

To Mothers

After reading this to your child, let's discuss together the importance of accomplishing something on your own without relying on others.

Crosscadia ③

The Wanderers of the Wind-Swept Land

Hajime Kanzaka